



# CALMING THE QUALMS

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ABOVE: In public meetings where your project is discussed, make sure you respond to individuals' concerns on a personal level.

INSET ABOVE: Meeting with apprehensive citizens in small groups makes people more comfortable and more easily allows them to communicate concerns or fears.

**IF LOCAL CITIZENS  
ARE VOICING  
DISCONTENT OVER  
YOUR WATERPARK  
PROJECT, YOU CAN  
SOOTHE THEIR  
FEARS WITH SOME  
PREPARATION AND  
PROPER APPROACH**

Do you have a fear that is keeping you up late at night? Stories about the difficulties of gaining public approval for a waterpark project may lead you to develop nightmares. Do you dream of Frankenstein-type mobs chasing you with torches, pitchforks and petitions? Do you toss and turn with devilish dreams of picket protesters causing havoc with neighbors as they chant about fears of crime-gone-wild, traffic, noise and decreased property values? Do you hear mocking voices scorning your plan and describing the project in hideous terms that create images of huge waterslides looming above residents' homes like aliens in a cornfield?

If so, take heart. Gaining public approval and developing a waterpark doesn't have to give you night sweats. Instead, you simply need some insider tips from those who have gone through the process themselves and succeeded with great accomplishment.

Read on for tips that will make your nights filled with sweet dreams...

## **Helping the Public Understand**

Most citizens who walk through a waterpark's gates have no idea what efforts the park's managers and

owners go through to reach opening day. Few realize that, behind the proverbial “Wizard of Oz” curtain, months or—in some cases—years of negotiating, planning and public meetings went into the park’s development. They have no clue that park owners put up thousands of “at-risk” dollars simply to determine whether the project even has a chance of approval.

The process of gaining public approval is, in fact, so daunting that I’ve heard some of my developer colleagues describe how, when you consider the journey involved, you would be hard-pressed to find anything designed to create more public conflict. In fact, in some quickly growing communities, cities hesitate to approve projects no matter *how* beneficial they are.

What makes the process so difficult is that your project not only requires the public’s approval, but you also need that of elected officials—those who look to public approval first and the facts about the matter second. As such, you face challenges on a variety of fronts: from the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) -oriented neighborhood groups to poll-paralyzed elected officials and bureaucrats afraid of public pressure.

To ensure the success of a publicly approved waterpark project, keep in mind that every real-estate-development project has its own identity. Either you clearly portray that personality to the public or someone else will do it for you. Unfortunately, neighborhood opposition groups who have the ear of a negative media are the ones who typically end up branding a project. But if you understand the process upfront, you’re more likely to start the project with a positive identity from the start.

### Communicating Clear Values

When it comes to gaining public approval for your project, it’s all about meeting the needs of the community you’re planning to serve. Those communities all have public officials, community neighborhood leaders and elected officials who need to let you know their wants and needs. Thus, your role is to listen to these desires and respond in a way that accommodates what people value in their communities. This is a crucial step in the development process. If you take time with this step and pursue it properly, then a community will embrace your mission and will support and follow it.

### First Things First

You’ve probably heard of the old real-estate adage: “Location, location, location.” It applies to waterparks, too. If you don’t pay attention to anything else regarding this topic, pay attention to this: One of the very first decisions you will need to make is where should you build your project? Here are some questions you need to seriously consider when deciding on a location:

- Which city/community embraces your vision?
- What geographic location fits your attendance and “Performa” models?
- Where precisely is the site you want to build your dream park?

These questions are important no matter

what your situation. For example, you could be:

- Currently in the process of seeking approval for your project
- Making a Request for Proposal (RFP) offering
- At a particular location that adequately addresses all your projection needs yet, because of its close proximity to existing neighbors, has opposition and political leadership at odds with your proposal.

Granted, you could be lucky enough to have discovered a location on a major roadway or freeway with no residential communities within a half-mile of your site where few will challenge your every move. Most likely, though, your site will have some opposition. Thus, it’s best to be prepared with a plan to address the negative aspects and promote the positive aspects of your project.

### Six Tips

Based on our company’s experience in facing such issues, we offer six tips that will make the process easier for you:

**Identify Opposition Points Ahead of Time.** Neighbors who oppose development within their community typically like the status quo and are concerned about perceived changes to their lifestyles. As previously mentioned, they fear unsightly slide towers, screaming children, blaring music, less open space, increased traffic congestion, the potential for crime or the lowering of property values. To help reduce the opposition’s concerns, reassure their *perceived value* of the status quo. For example, demonstrate that your company has an excellent track record of past projects, provide evidence of professional design and maintenance experience, and give reassurance that you will follow all the community’s specifications, requirements and permits.

**Avoid Large Neighborhood Meetings.** While public officials embrace the large, public-meeting strategy, such meetings can introduce opponents to one another, allowing them to hear and adopt each other’s agendas. Large gatherings also encourage spotlight-hungry activists to engage in outrageous claims to impress their

## CONCESSIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL NEGOTIATION

- **Remove real or perceived threats.** Make changes to your waterpark project so that opponents’ concerns are ameliorated. Project changes usually involve making adjustments to the location of attractions, limiting the height of attractions—and, thereby, reducing neighbors’ line-of-sight impact—and providing additional parking spaces beyond what your traffic study indicates to ensure traffic won’t flow over onto adjoining neighborhood streets.
- **Use creative mitigation measures.** Doing so will reduce the “offensive” levels of your project. For example, offer to include attractive, highly themed and landscaped facilities to mitigate the sound and view impacts from neighbors’ backyards. Again, the goal is to mitigate areas that meet the neighbors’ negative concerns to preserve their status-quo lifestyle.
- **Appeal to neighbors’ positive sides by offering a proactive benefit.** For example, offer to provide an exclusive, annual neighborhood party at your park or a thematic feature that embraces the local area’s culture. Any type of olive branch you can extend demonstrates your willingness to hear citizens’ concerns and offer reasonable concessions to address them.

fellow NIMBY partners. If you need to meet with large groups, attempt to create smaller “block meetings” at the homes of residences within the area or local coffee houses or stretch out meetings over several hours or even days. In such small groups, neighbors feel more comfortable communicating their concerns or fears. At your community gatherings, enlist the help of a neutral host whose role is to walk around the room to direct conversations in a meaningful fashion. I have been to more than one “neighborhood meeting” where loud screaming and yelling ensued. Yet, with an experienced host in the room, these inspired “actors” were calmed down and redirected to focus on more realistic topics vs. attempting to spread fear and panic in the room. Another benefit to avoiding large gatherings: Crowds often create too many questions and concerns for you to adequately address at one sitting. So turn to smaller groups for a more reasonable opportunity to be heard.

On a side note, if you’re able to bring a team of individuals who embrace your project to the meeting, it will help offset the “nobody-wants-this-project” mentality. ***Listen to the Neighbors’ Concerns.*** Honesty and an open ear will win the hearts and minds of your opponents. And, after all, offering both is least you can do for those who will live around your park. To come to a meeting to “tell the neighbors what a wonderful project we’re going to build” will turn a crowd against you as fast as stink on a skunk. As much as possible, go out of your way to demonstrate that you hear, understand, appreciate and respect them personally.

***Prepare for Useful and Nonuseful Concessions.*** Giving away the farm to help offset building a new waterpark on a piece of land that has been vacant for the last 20 years will not solve the opposition challenges. Both good concessions and bad ones exist. For example, if opponents mistakenly believe your waterpark will drive down the property values in their neighborhood, eliminating attractions from your plan will not resolve the fundamental base of their position. By contrast, offer—instead—to reposition large attractions away from adjoining homes, limit hours of operations to close at dusk or design a contract that limits the number of bands that will play in your park. In so doing, you’ll be seen as making major concessions. Listen, also, whether some type of “silver bullet” exists that you can offer opponents to appease their concerns. It may simply take some investigating with public and neighborhood sources to determine what that concession may be.

***Give everyone R-E-S-P-E-C-T.*** Aretha Franklin stated it best when she sang, “All I’m askin’ is for a little respect . . . R-E-S-P-E-C-T.” Go out of your way to demonstrate how much you appreciate every citizen’s concern and respect those concerns. This means you need to look people in the eye and address them by name if possible. Oftentimes in a public meeting, speakers are required to give their name before addressing the gathering. When they do, write that name down and respond to that individual’s concern by addressing him or her personally.

***Practice the Art of Persuasion and Negotiation.*** It’s not uncommon that the opposition’s stance is based on untrue facts, misunderstandings, lack of credible information, exaggerated impact on the surrounding neighborhood and good old-fashioned misperception. The solution is to correctly inform the public with the facts. But communicating this information can vary. For example, you can attempt to resolve the issue via persuasion or via negotiation. But which tactic is more effective?

***Persuasion:*** To successfully win over the opposition with persuasion, you will need to be able to change neighbors’ perceptions, values and beliefs that your waterpark will not negatively impact their world. Often, we rely solely on “just the facts” of the project—providing citizens lots of facts, charts, statistics and drawings—in the hope they will carefully evaluate our proposal and support it. This tactic usually is not very effective.

***Negotiation:*** Negotiation is more about making concessions to get the best deal for yourself and the neighbors at the lowest possible cost. It’s typically much more successful. (See boxed information, “Concessions for Successful Negotiation,” on page 33.)

These tips may only scratch the surface, but hopefully they will help as you consider building your next project. With careful planning and by taking time to understand the emotional concerns of your opponents, you should be able to develop a reasonable idea of what the public will rule on your facility’s plans.