

Who, Why, and How Communities Oppose Affordable Housing

[home](#) » [Affordable Housing](#)

Posted by [Corianne Payton Scally](#) and [J. Rosie Tighe](#) on April 23, 2014

This is Part 3 in a series on NIMBY and affordable housing. To catch up on the rest of the series, read [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).

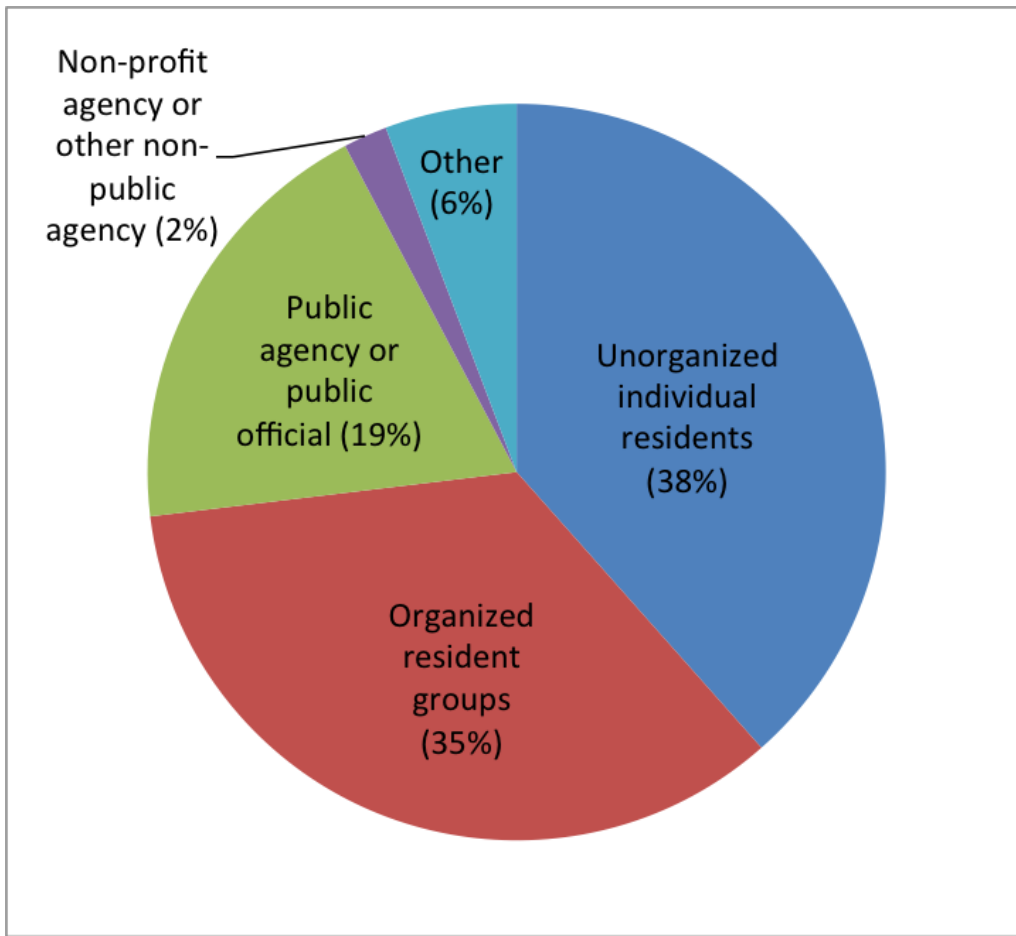
--

In this post, we continue to discuss the results of our survey of affordable housing developers in New York State on their experiences of community opposition to their development projects. Out of 75 developers—nonprofit and for-profit—responding to our survey (a response rate of 50 percent), 70 percent have experienced at least one incident of community opposition. In [our first post](#), we discussed why these developers pursue affordable housing projects, what types they build, and what funding sources they use. In [our second post](#), we analyzed where opposition occurs, what types of developers and projects are targeted most, and when during the project cycle community opposition is most likely to occur.

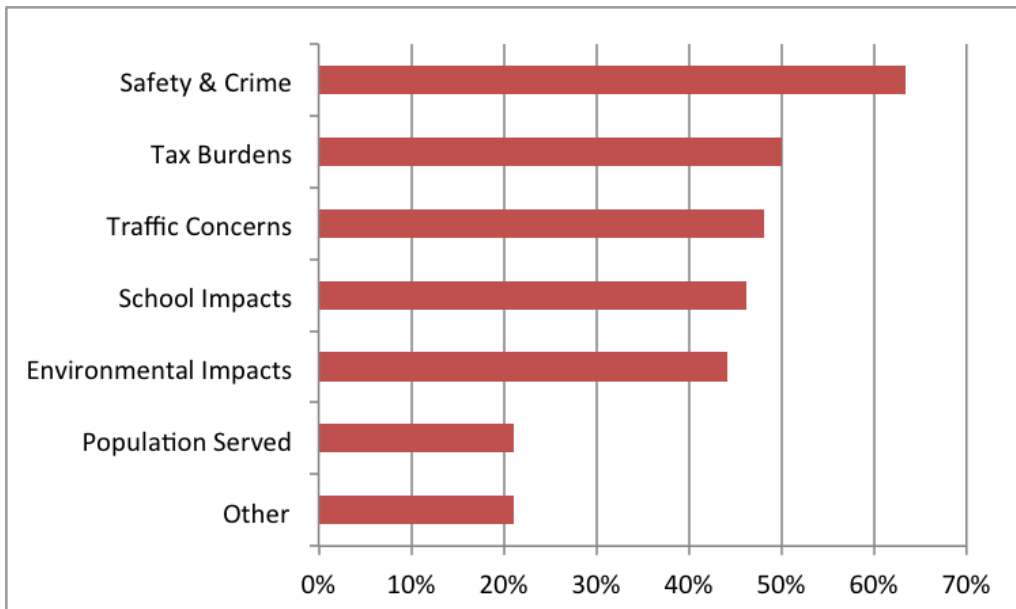
In this post, we present who opposes affordable housing development projects in New York State, what specific concerns are raised by communities to justify their opposition, and what tactics they most commonly use.

Individual residents and organized resident groups are the most frequent sources of opposition, but public agencies and officials can also be vocal opponents. We asked developers to choose how local opposition is most typically organized, based on their experiences. As shown in the pie chart below, residents were the lead opponents according to almost three out of every four developers. For 38 percent of developers, resident opposition was typically staged by unorganized individuals. Another 35 percent said organized resident groups—such as neighborhood associations, homeowners associations, and community coalitions—led opposition efforts to their affordable housing development projects. Perhaps most surprising, almost one out of every five developers said that a public agency or public official was the primary source of opposition to their projects. Getting residents on board seems a critical strategy for developers to pursue.

This is an area where public officials and planners, and transparent planning processes and communication, could help, especially [when coupled with our findings](#) that local opposition is most frequently experienced at the time of local approval of the development project.



Community concerns about safety and crime, and the type of population served show specific biases against affordable housing versus general development. A lot of past studies on NIMBY have tried to differentiate between community concern about any type of development (such as BANANA opposition: “Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything”) versus affordable housing specifically. Our results provide interesting insight into some specific reasons that communities may be opposed to any development, but are particularly fearful of affordable housing.



First, the most commonly reported reason for opposition is fear of increased crime and decreased sense of safety—

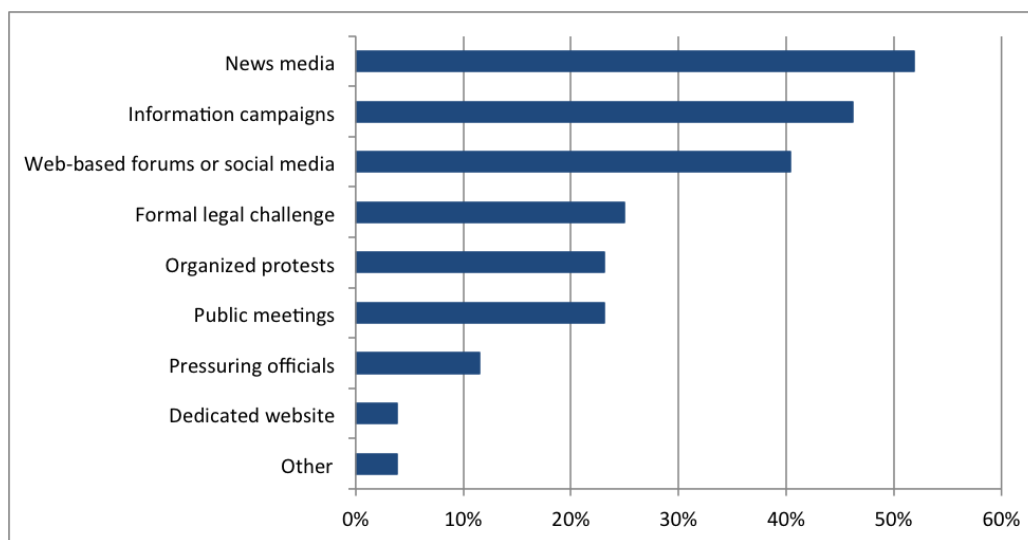
heard by over three out of every five developers experiencing opposition. Half of the developers also regularly hear community concern about tax burdens. This concern comes into play with many development projects, but more typically with developments such as affordable housing that normally seek some type of property tax concession from local government, and thus are viewed as not paying their “fair share” of the costs of public services to the site.

Concerns about traffic, school impacts, and environmental impacts are also frequently employed, according to developers, but are not necessarily unique to affordable housing development projects. School impacts may be more of a concern when communities are operating under the assumption that households qualifying for affordable housing have a higher proportion of school-aged children than non-subsidized housing development, particularly when coupled with property tax concessions that will affect the school tax base, as well.

While [recent research in New York State](#) based on calculated multipliers by income and numbers of bedrooms has suggested that this assumption may not be true, more research is needed on how to address this area of community concern.

Perhaps the most direct indication that community opposition is specifically against affordable housing developments is that one out of every five developers mentioned opposition to the people they expected to be served by the development: “those people”, “welfare recipients”, “homeless”, “special needs”, and “renters”. These arguments expose the fact that [irrational fears and misinformation may drive some opposition](#), as one of us has explored previously. Such prejudices can be hard to challenge and change, but it seems clear that more work is needed to counter the root causes of opposition to affordable housing development projects.

Communities put a lot of effort into opposing affordable housing development projects using diverse tactics, from traditional communications strategies, to emergent technologies, and legal challenges. The most common form of opposition remains the use of news media, including newspaper ads, editorials and letters to the editor, with over half of developers reporting this tactic. Over 45 percent also said their development projects were targeted through information campaigns, such as flyers, petitions, and yard signs distributed throughout the community.



The use of web-based discussion boards, forums, and social media is also a significant means of communicating opposition today, with two out of every five developers indicating the importance of these emergent technologies. A handful of developers also mentioned that an entire website dedicated to opposing one or more of their affordable housing development projects was launched and maintained. This is a significant effort that requires further study as to who is more likely to use this tactic within communities (e.g. individual opponents or organized ones), who their target audience is (e.g. news media vs. local officials), and what effect this growing opposition strategy has on affordable housing development compared to more traditional means of opposition.

One out of every four developers experiencing opposition to their projects said they had been the target of a formal

legal challenge. Roughly, that means if you are an affordable housing developer in New York State, you have around a 25 percent chance of facing a lawsuit against a proposed project (although realistically this probability will vary based on a variety of known and unknown factors we cannot explore with our small population in a single state, related to the developer, the project, and the community). While this may be higher or lower than the rest of the country, it should still be cause for concern. Every lawsuit represents a loss of monetary resources and time that could otherwise be spent on developing affordable housing or supporting other community building activities.

Organized protests, such as active picketing at construction site or public meetings, still occur, but perhaps not as much as we would expect. However, the same number of developers—over 1 out of every 5—also noted that individuals spoke up against their development projects at public meetings in less organized ways. And outside of these public meetings, local officials are still being pressured by their constituents to oppose affordable housing development.

These all point again to the importance of transparent, well-organized planning processes that acknowledge points of conflict and work through them in an equitable way that addresses the concerns of existing residents, but acknowledges the reasonableness of promoting affordable housing options within every community. Local officials, planners, and developers need to ask: Who is speaking out against the project? What are their primary concerns? Are they real concerns or assumed ones? Are they based on irrational fears and prejudice, or solid evidence? How can we cultivate a climate of two-way conversation, rather than jump directly to confrontation approaches such as protest, media campaigns, and legal challenges?

Our fourth post will take a look at how developers have worked to overcome community opposition and what they have found most effective in New York State. We will also summarize both the positive outcomes and negative outcomes of opposition.

About the author [more »](#)

Corianne Payton Scally, Ph.D., is CEO of HOUSERS, LLC, conducting research on affordable housing and community development policy and practice at the federal, state and local levels. She was formerly Associate Professor and Director of the Master's in Urban and Regional Planning Program at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Rosie Tighe, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning at Appalachian State University. She holds a PhD in Community and Regional Planning from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master's Degree in Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning from Tufts University. Her research focuses on fair housing, race and class, public opinion, and housing affordability.

If you like this article, please [subscribe](#) to *Shelterforce* in print or make a small [donation](#) to keep Rooflines strong.

[« previous You Must Remember This: Uses of the Past in Community Development next » Another Way to Invest in Mobile Home Parks](#)

COMMENTS