

AIRPORT [®]

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Step by step

Winning the support of local communities should be the vital first step in guaranteeing the success of airport capital development projects, writes Jesse McKnight.

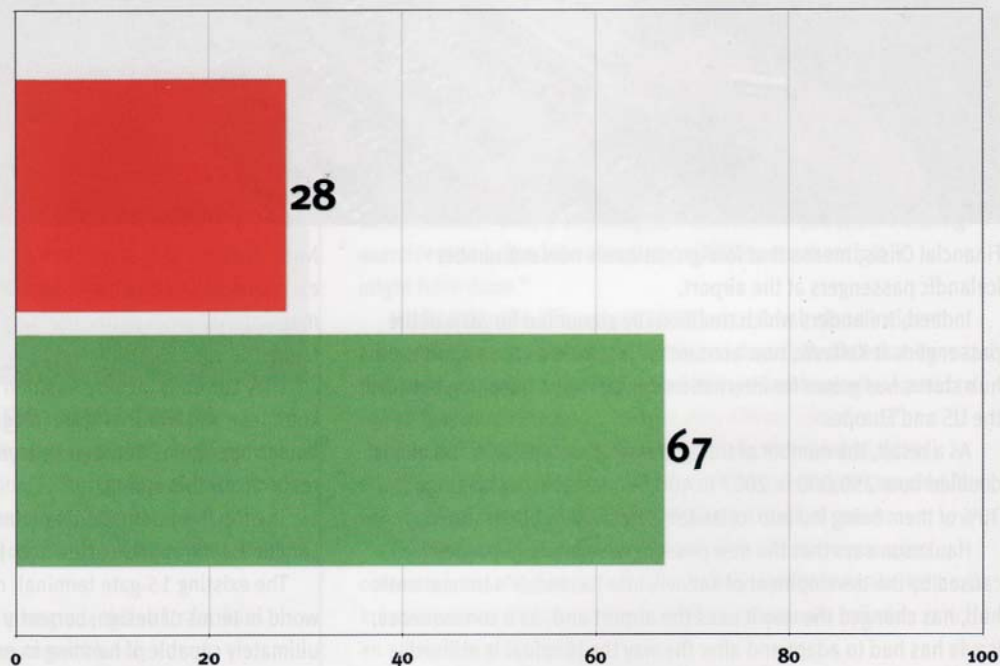
If your local airport wanted to expand, would you support or oppose that expansion?

Would oppose

28

Would support

67



Most likely opponents:

- Aged 21-35 or 65+
- High school diploma or less
- Identify as Conservative
- Identify as Tea Party member

Most likely supporters:

- Male, ages 36-45
- Rent their home
- Income over \$75k
- Identify as Liberal or moderate

Two-thirds of all Americans say they would support expansion of capacity at their local airport according to the 2011 Saint Index, an annual survey of the public's attitude towards large-scale developments.

Virtually all demographic groups, regions and income brackets support proposals to add runways, terminals or otherwise increase airport capacity by margins of 2-1 and sometimes 3-1.

The show of airport support is extraordinary, yet airport expansion projects are among the most controversial infrastructure development programmes worldwide. Indeed, such projects often become a

battleground that pits developers against highly motivated and organised citizens.

So why is this? If the public, in general, backs airport development plans, what are airports doing wrong?

A combination of factors add up to the Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) phenomenon, which the Saint Index has tracked since 2005 in the US, UK and Canada. The most common reasons for opposing projects are the fear of worsening traffic, noise and air pollution, all of which, it is argued, could potentially damage a community's reputation and bring down property prices.



The price of failure

What happens if activist opponents gain the political support to block or significantly delay additional capacity at major US airports?

Worst case: Seven metropolitan areas and 18 airports will be overwhelmed by 2015, growing to 15 metropolitan areas and 27 airports by 2025, according to the FAA.

An October 2011 list compiled by pressure group, Aviation Justice Express, identified 49 national and local organisations actively fighting against airport expansion and noise pollution around airports.

Based on experience, long battles and scaled-back plans are likely at a host of gateways across the US and the globe in 2012.

For example, expansion plans for New York JFK into Jamaica Bay face a myriad of opposition groups citing potential damage to the Big Apple's ecological crown jewel as a wetlands and estuarine area of national importance.

Elsewhere, residents in California's Sonoma County want to reduce plans for an \$84 million expansion of their airport, fearing larger aircraft, more noise and more traffic around the airport.

While the cost of expanding Philadelphia International Airport has jumped from \$5.2 billion to \$6.4 billion and riled

communities only months after the FAA gave a green light to the plan.

It is also worth remembering that the newest runway at Boston's Logan International Airport took 33 years to become reality, after decades of vitriolic community and political warfare. It is half the size of Logan's three main jet runways, and its use is restricted significantly by court-imposed conditions.

Likewise, the new third runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport was first discussed 20 years ago, and approved by the FAA a decade ago.

And when Florida's Broward County Commission agreed to build a new runway at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, more than 1,000 people packed the meeting. Sheriff's deputies were called in, and one environmental activist was escorted away in handcuffs.

Finally, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, recently said that the coalition government is now open to improving airport infrastructure around London. This change of heart follows community opposition that forced Birmingham and Luton airports to abandon expansion plans, led government planners to reject development schemes at Manchester and Coventry and hobbled expansion plans at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports.

Fear of change, too, is another driver behind opposition to large infrastructure development like airport expansion.

In recent years, some anti-expansion groups have evolved into sophisticated sources of opposition, sharing tactics that have worked elsewhere to thwart similar projects, particularly when wildlife and environmental sustainability issues are at stake.

Due diligence

As an ever-increasing number of airports are discovering, citing the economic benefits of an expansion project alone will not fire up the latent public support necessary to counter the opposition.

Indeed, without taking proactive steps to identify and unlock community support for their plans, many airport projects can get mired in years of expensive delays, as detailed in the box story above.

One way of being proactive, is to conduct a thorough self-examination of a project to discover possible areas where it is vulnerable to criticism or even exploitation by opponents.

Land use politics – and the concepts of political due diligence, building an advocacy pyramid and a virtuous cycle outlined below – provide a practical and achievable way to get people to say 'yes' to airport expansion.

Politically savvy opponents know how to direct intense constituent pressure on local officials. They pack public hearings, generate phone calls to city councillors and airport authority members, and make it clear they will vote for candidates who oppose new development.

So, how does one overcome this negative mindset? The first mistake proponents of major infrastructure projects typically make is to launch

the approval and permitting process without fully understanding the local politics.

In my opinion, applicants must go into the process ready to run a campaign, anticipating that citizen opponents will begin organising to protect their 'neighbourhood' against airport expansion as soon as they learn about the proposal.

The first step should then be a comprehensive community and political due diligence investigation. Understand the political climate in and around a project before going public. Identify the likely opponents and potential supporters.

What are the political views on land use of the politicians who must approve the project? What is the history of the site? Have controversial developments been proposed for the location, or nearby, in the past?

Outreach to key stakeholders must be timed and targeted. Leverage the public support of all people and organisations in the community who stand to benefit in any way such expansion.

Like any campaign, one must identify, recruit, organise and deliver real people to express their support to local government officials – to speak up at public hearings, sign petitions, call officials and write letters to the editor.

If one demonstrates sufficient public support, board members can vote in favour of planning permits without fear that they are defying monolithic public opposition. They need political 'cover' if they are going to defy the angry demands of NIMBYs.

It's not easy, because most people who support a project have no personal stake in getting off the sofa to demonstrate their backing. Resourceful and creative tactics are required to maximise and leverage every expression of support, no matter how passive that first indication of support. It is a campaign.



The advocacy pyramid: creating a virtuous cycle



The advocacy pyramid

When reaching out for community support, the developer will find a wide range of people – from those who are unaware, all the way up to those who are committed to support a project.

We call this an ‘advocacy pyramid’ – everyone is somewhere along a ‘value’ and ‘quantity’ scale. The higher up the pyramid, the more valuable they are to one’s campaign; the wider the category, the more people are in that pool. Moving people up the scale from unaware to vocal support is how one gets to ‘Yes.’

Where are the NIMBYs? Not in this pyramid. Trying to convert opponents is a waste of time and resources. While they cannot be ignored, a campaign is much better served focusing on people who can be converted into support.

The typical airport expansion campaign has two goals: move the unawares up to vocal advocates, and turn them out. Some unaware or undecided people do not care enough to pick a side. Those who are receptive need help – give them information and persuade them.

Little energy is expended per person on the bottom of the pyramid (use mass communications, low-context communications) and more energy for people higher up – face-to-face conversations, high-context communications.

At this point, the ‘virtuous cycle’ comes into play – the more information they get, the more they can effect change, and this is how people can be persuaded to become more openly supportive.

A land use campaign aims to control the debate and drive the message. Tactics including flooding the target community with a core message, pumping traffic into the lower half of the pyramid. An initial voter ID programme can identify possible and actual supporters.

Vocal advocates should be engaged regularly; leveraging this group and guiding them to support and motivate, encouraging and empowering supporters, all further spread the message.

At the action step – a city council hearing or a vote – they help carry the message.

The advocacy pyramid requires much effort and one-on-one interaction to build grass roots support for a project potentially as unpopular as airport expansion. Most people who support a project do not feel strongly enough about it to publicly stand up against a neighbour.

It is not a simple matter to organise public support when some people are adamantly opposed. In the case of an airport expansion, it is essential. Failure to do so almost certainly ensures defeat.

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About the author

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