

## TESTING THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATERS - THE VALUE OF ADVANCED KNOWLEDGE

Creating thriving and resilient communities is an enormous task, and businesses have a critical role in helping communities flourish. Conversely, communities also play a vital role in the success of a business, and even the smallest community can have a significant impact on the businesses in their neighborhood. Both neighborhood associations and neighborhood boards can be influential in their communities, and there is a dynamic that exists between these groups and business owners. While they both advocate for their community, here are some important considerations when dealing with the neighboring stakeholders while developing or repositioning a retail asset:

- Make no assumptions. Just because it seemingly makes sense to bring an unfamiliar use that is complementary into a shopping center, it is not safe to assume that the surrounding neighborhood will embrace it without question or objections.
- Conduct formal research. Research can be expensive, but when compared to the cost of time and money involved in a failed deal or two after months of negotiations, that initial



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cost equates to money well spent. Intelligent and tremendously useful market research should be contracting with a respected research firm that will test neighborhood attitudes toward development, traffic, liquor licensing, tolerance for types of vendors/outlets and loyalties to existing tenants can provide valuable insight and useful information that can be utilized in a variety of ways.

- Identify the key influencers. Often those who have deep influence in a community are not necessarily those with official positions on boards or on government. They may be long-time residents, respected pastors or priests, quiet volunteers and kupuna (community elders). Low-key conversations held well in advance of a project can provide excellent guidance as to who the key influencers are before moving forward to the official levels.
- Informal research. Informal research can be in the form of less structured neighborhood get-togethers with small groups from various demographic slices of the surrounding community. People love to be asked their opinions; and sometimes it is simply this involvement that goes a long way toward unnecessary resistance in the future. Research companies call them focus groups and handle these meetings in a very prescribed and managed process. However, you may choose to conduct these informally yourself. Generous listening is key.
- Neighborhood associations may play a bigger role than neighborhood boards. Ultimately, their voices can shape (or break) a project. Though they have a rightful say in the shaping of their community,



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opening meaningful dialogue with the key influencers in these associations early on can prevent obstacles later. Understanding the extent of the association's or board's influence is critical in determining where to expend resources and political capital.

- Determine the community's vision for an asset. Implementing approaches like those described earlier are beneficial in deciphering the residents' vision for their community. Even the most innocuous and seemingly positive improvements may be viewed from an entirely different perspective by surrounding neighbors. Finding out where the community's expectations are set is advantageous in knowing how hard to press and where potential land mines may exist.
- Engage a public outreach firm early in the game. Public relations agencies may offer creative solutions to promote your business and entice the community. They also have relationships with the media to garner the publicity and attention needed for your new business in the area. Employing the use of a public relations firm may also present a stronger and more controlled image to the public. Their arsenal of resources and public relations tools can help reach the masses most effectively, as well as create value for your brand with the community.



*Use a thoughtful approach when engaging with the community and key neighborhood figures.*

Often the process of development or repositioning can be accomplished with only moderate levels of resistance from the surrounding neighborhood. But it has been our experience that a thoughtful approach utilizing strategies like these can significantly mitigate whatever resistance may be present. Ultimately, the time and investment associated with this process pale in comparison to the potential delays and costs that result from not understanding the context and mindset of a nearby community.



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