

Not in my back yard

By Tony Pearson

'Not in my back yard,' otherwise known as NIMBY, has been a rallying cry for some time against a variety of developments. Sometimes it's positive, as when communities object to hazardous waste. Sometimes it's negative, like when neighbourhoods object to someone buying property. It depends on the situation.

At last week's meeting of Bancroft council, two such situations arose. In the first case, Dungannon residents came to raise their objection to any sale of their landfill, or opening it up to receive waste or recycling from other municipalities. In the second case, residents of Maple Street turned out for the second time to try to stop the construction of three new duplexes on their street.

In such situations, members of council have difficult choices to make. In the case of the Dungannon landfill, the desire of residents has to be weighed against the desperate need of the town for new revenue sources to offset its debt, including the deficit on its sewer system. The argument goes back and forth, like a game of tennis: on the one side, the sewer deficit should be paid for by its users; on the other side, the sewer serves the main commercial district, so raising the rates too high discourages new development. It can go back and forth like that for some time.

In the case of Maple Street, the argument is one of the wishes of those who bought on a quiet residential street against the need for more rental housing, especially for seniors, in the town.

But does it always have to be all or nothing? Must any decision be an outright win for one side, and a complete loss for the other? Or might there be acceptable compromises to investigate? Is it possible to discover some middle ground which each side can live with, if not embrace with open arms? If the possibility is granted, who can seek such compromises, and how?

In a former life, I served as head of a teachers' union for a period of time. In that role, I participated in what is called the collective bargaining process. This process can be very adversarial. We are all aware of what happens when the process breaks down, and a strike or lockout results. The resultant disruption often turns people against the whole union-management negotiation process. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases, agreement is reached without a service disruption. That's not to say that when the final bargain is struck, everyone is deliriously happy. Each side feels that they didn't get everything they deserved. And when the bargaining teams return to their members ? in our case, the teachers and the school trustees ? they know that they stand to be accused of giving up the ship.

But that's collective bargaining ? a process of reaching compromises, otherwise known as give-and-take. Each side gives some things away, in order to make gains in other areas.

The essence of collective bargaining is that the representatives of the two sides meet face to face and hash out the deal. From time to time, one side adopts a 'take it or leave it' stance and negotiations break down. What ensues can be very painful, for both sides. This gives everyone fresh incentive to do better next time, and so well over 95 per cent of negotiations end peacefully.

But for some reason ? or un-reason ? the tide is running away from compromise. Many convince themselves that what the other side wants is absolutely wrong, and must be rejected outright and completely. In some cases, the idea takes hold that the other side is not just wrong but malevolent, and must be contested tooth and nail. It's like in modern science fiction movies, where the aliens are inherently evil (and fortunately, incredibly bad shots).

What might happen if, say, representatives of the Dungannon landfill group sat down with representatives of Bancroft council and administration, away from a council meeting and away from media coverage? What if each party gave itself some time to explore the other side's outlook and information? What if the two parties held several meetings, not just one, to look at possibilities?

When I was involved with labour negotiations, part of my reading was a short book entitled *Getting to Yes*. Its basic premise is that you're never going to get everything you want, so why not try to identify together what each side's most vital interests are, and then work on meeting them at least half way. The concept was that instead of being seated across the table from each other, both parties were on the same side of the table, working together in pursuit of a mutually acceptable solution.

For a journalist, crisis and confrontation are far more interesting than quiet negotiation. But for town residents and councillors, quiet diplomacy may have some merit.