

# The Patriot Ledger

## Helping developers overcome opposition

Consultant helps developers to bring in new projects by understanding residents

By Julie Onufrak  
The Patriot Ledger  
March 11, 2009

QUINCY — Tip O'Neill said that all politics is local. Patrick Fox, the president of Saint Consulting Group in Hingham, says that all land-use is political. Fox said he started working on political campaigns when he was 12 years old. When he got married and the nomadic life of a campaign manager became difficult to continue, he ran a congressional district office and later started a government relations consulting firm. Through a mutual friend, he began consulting for Mike Saint, the founder of Saint Consulting, which helps developers fight controversial land-use battles. Eventually, Fox came to work for the company full-time in 1998. He has been its president since 2003.

With more than 85 employees in 10 U.S. offices (the company also has offices in London and Toronto), Saint Consulting had about \$30 million in revenue in its 2008 fiscal year.

Fox, who is 44 and lives in Lexington, developed the Saint Index, a survey that measures attitudes toward real estate development. The fourth annual survey, which was released in January, showed that fewer people are opposed to a Wal-Mart being built in their hometown than in previous years. According to the index, 59 percent of Americans say they are more likely to support new commercial projects in their hometown given the current economic situation.

### What is the No. 1 factor that makes people opposed to development?

The Saint Index would tell you that it's traffic, or character of the community. But I don't think that's true. I think it's real estate values. It's people protecting the most important investment they've ever made. To the extent that they're worried about traffic or character of the community or any of these other things, it's because of how it's going to impact real estate values.

### What kinds of projects are the hardest to get approved?

Landfills are very difficult. Because with a landfill, I've got to show you how this project is going to benefit the community, and a number of those benefits might not occur for 20 to 30 years. I can tell you it's going to be a lovely park when I'm through, but until then, there's going to be truck traffic, there's going to be dust, there's going to be blasting. So it's important with a project like that to find additional ways to be a good neighbor and benefit the community.

It's community sponsorships, being a contributing part of the community, finding needs in the community and helping to address them. Casinos are tough, landfills, quarries are all things where you need to find other ways to demonstrate community benefit, because the projects themselves are difficult to sell.

### Do you think people are more accepting of development in a recession?

When I ask you, are you more likely to support development now because of the state of the economy, most people would say yes. But then when I tell you I'm going to put it across the street from your house, the economy doesn't matter so much anymore. You still don't want it. While the numbers say that it should be getting easier, the reality on the street is it doesn't get easier. If I'm going to put it across the street from your house and your family, it's still a very emotional issue. ... Lots of people love Wal-Mart, lots of people want to shop there, but few people want to live next to one. It's always going to be great in your neighborhood, not mine. And that's grocery stores, it's Dunkin' Donuts, it's everything.

### How can developers get projects approved?

The tactics of the past — a lot of developers still do this — are that you try to keep it quiet, you propose it in July or August, or you want your hearing around Christmas. "Let's try to sneak it through, let's cut a backroom deal."

What happens now is, everything gets opposed, it always gets out, and if there's a hearing room full of angry constituents, you're going to lose. Elected officials and appointed officials are not going to commit political suicide to get your development project passed, no matter how good it is for the community.

So it's about early outreach — you don't announce your project and then show up at the hearing. You need to spend time in the community, talk to them about what it is you're thinking of doing, get input before you actually propose it. And there are a lot of things that you can do using a mutual gains approach to make sure that everybody benefits. There have been situations where we've changed the color of the back of a retail chain so that a baseball could be seen against the backdrop, because it was near a ball field. And we got people to support it that way. If you can work with people, you can bring them over.

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