



Nudging NIMBY: Do positive messages regarding the benefits of increased housing density influence resident stated housing development preferences?



Carey Doberstein*, Ross Hickey, Eric Li

University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Do positive messages regarding the benefits of increased housing density influence resident stated housing development preferences? We employ an experimental research design to test the efficacy of positive messages regarding increased housing density to reduce observed NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard). Using a survey-based experiment, we compared four messages: a notification of the public benefits; the private benefits; a social comparison drawing on expert knowledge of housing preferences; and a control stating recent trends in the municipality. Our sample of 202 residents of a mid-sized Canadian city indicates that messages regarding the public benefits of increased density reduced NIMBYism by four times the control message. We find some evidence in favor of the efficacy of the social comparison treatment as well. We discuss these findings with reference to the literature on smart city growth, and the policy implications that emerge.

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1. Introduction

As small cities grow into larger ones, policymakers and residents often face a difficult transition from low-density development to more compact growth, due to pressures related to sprawl, long-distance commuting, and in many cases land scarcity. For many, urban intensification or compactness is an essential ingredient for sustainable development (Hassan and Lee, 2015; Jabareen, 2006). Yet the psychological transition in residents' minds to different modes of accommodating growth is a slow and at times painful reconceptualization of community values and traditions, as evidenced by patterns of hostility to densification observed in rapidly growing communities all across North America (Lewis and Baldassare, 2010). Residential densification may face resistance in part because it is often framed or understood to impose a costs on existing residents in order to accommodate new ones. The fabric and feeling of neighbourhoods will necessarily change. But we also know that densification of a growing urban area can provide a number of private and public benefits, particularly on measures that we know residents value, such as proximity of amenities, walkability, and a sense of community (Daly et al., 2003). As such, we are interested in understanding whether the (typically negative) attitudes

towards residential densification in a North American context are malleable?

To test this, we devised a randomized survey experiment on residents of Kelowna, Canada—a fast growing, mid-sized city that has historically preferred very low density development—which exposed respondents to different messages on residential densification to observe if there is variation in their willingness to accept densification in their neighbourhood. Kelowna is mid-sized city in the interior of British Columbia, situated four hours by car from Vancouver and is the third largest metropolitan area in the province at 180,000 in population. The vast majority of residents travel by car: individuals driving an automobile constitute 67% of all trips among residents in the region, another 16% as passengers in the car, and only 7% walk and 4% use transit (Acuere Consulting, 2013). Kelowna is thus an ideal setting to study attitudes towards residential densification as it has experienced significant urban sprawl. Kelowna's Census Metropolitan Area ranks eighth out of thirty-three Canadian urban centers in urban sprawl (Seliske et al., 2012). Yet in recent years the city council has supported efforts to densify future urban growth, both residential and commercial.

This article begins by reviewing the extant literature on attitudes towards urban growth and residential densification as a means to build a framework for surveying and analyzing the factors that shape housing choice and preferences. Following that, we draw on lessons from the framing effects literature to devise an experimental survey on residents that tests different messaging

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: carey.doberstein@ubc.ca (C. Doberstein).

on their expressed preferences, in particular whether stressing the public benefits versus the private benefits of compact cities causes residents to shift attitudes to residential densification. In the third section the experimental design and hypotheses are presented, followed by an analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings. We find that messages regarding the public benefits of increased density reduced NIMBYism by four times the control message, as well as some evidence in favor of the efficacy of the social comparison treatment—that is, learning how their neighbors feel about the issue also shifted their views. The final section reflects on the implications of these findings for policy makers and suggests avenues for future research to address the limitations of the study.

1.1. Attitudes to urban growth and residential densification

The choice of where one lives and the features of that residence are among the most significant decisions in life, especially so if one is purchasing a home. One's home is not simply shelter, or a physical asset, but is also typically rich with symbols and a conveyance of a particular set of values and lifestyle (Mazanti, 2007). Homes and neighbourhoods, in this sense, are economically and socially constructed (Adams and Tiesdell, 2010; Charney, 2015; Guy and Henneberry, 2000). Thus the factors that shape neighbourhood choice, the type of home and the amenities they both provide are multiple, interrelated and vary across income and life-cycle cohorts. Yet neighbourhoods and cities evolve—particularly high growth cities—and often struggle with reconciling the individual preferences of residents with the demands of real estate development, as well as the collective goals of sustainable urban planning. Most rapidly growing cities are increasingly attentive to urban sprawl and recognize the hidden costs associated with low-density urban development—including traffic congestion associated with commuting, loss of outer-lying agricultural land, and higher greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions associated with non-compact living—yet confront a population that tends to demonstrate clear preferences for low-density suburban development (Jensen, 2004; Lewis and Baldassare, 2010). Farr (2008) captures this contradictory set of beliefs succinctly by claiming that “there are two things Americans dislike: density and sprawl” (103). That is, despite declaring firm opposition to sprawl, suburban compaction efforts can trigger vocal NIMBYism from existing residents when densification is contemplated in their own neighbourhood (Lewis and Baldassare, 2010; Dunham-Jones, 2005; Jensen, 2004). Yet with public policy pressures towards residential densification, the public's tolerance of these approaches relative to auto-centric sprawl is questionable, and voter satisfaction in their residential environments is obviously an important factor in the policy development process (Smith and Billig, 2012).

Although many urban planners and local politicians would like to see an end to low-density urbanization and sprawl, support for alternatives has been limited among the public (Howley, 2009; Downs, 2005; Talen, 2001). Yet it has been reported that walkable, dense and transit-oriented models of growth and development may be favoured by childless young-adults, lower-income groups, empty-nesters and ageing seniors (Lewis and Baldassare, 2010; Dunham-Jones, 2005; Myres and Gearin, 2001). However, a strong preference for low-density living persists in a North American context—a single-family detached house on a large lot is consistently the overwhelmingly preferred choice of the North American housing consumer (Talen, 2001; Myers and Gearin, 2001; Day, 2000). Not surprisingly, Talen (2001) suggests that two-parent families with children show the greatest preference for low-density, suburban living. Principal reasons identified for this preference include: an association with affluence and success (Jensen, 2004; Day, 2000); perceptions of safety (Myres and Gearin, 2001; Day, 2000); privacy (Day, 2000; Myres and Gearin, 2001); a setting of

space, nature and greenery (Jensen, 2004; Talen, 2001; Day, 2000); and ease of automobile use and parking (Myres and Gearin, 2001; Audirac, 1999). Yet other research has demonstrated that people can identify the benefits of compact urban living, with most identifying easy accessibility to amenities and services, social life and cultural activities as the primary virtues, but can also express the limitations of compact urban living, identifying higher cost of housing, lack of space and a perception of higher traffic congestion as the main drawbacks (Howley, 2009).

Thus previous research suggests that residential preferences towards densification show common patterns across cases in North America and Europe, yet policy makers remain interested in the potential to persuade residents towards more compact living to achieve broader public policy goals of sustainable development. Williams et al. (1996) emphasize the importance of public acceptability and attractiveness in building more compact urban areas. They contend that it is essential that urban densification bring about better public transport, services, and a more vibrant cultural life and that these benefits are not outweighed by the (perceived or real) negative impacts of high-compact city living such as overcrowding or higher housing costs.

2. Framing effects

Given that politics and public policy represent the continuous struggle over ideas and agendas via persuasive methods of communication, scholars have long been acutely aware that there is no single way to present or discuss a political or policy issue, and that selective emphasis or presentation of reality is a core feature of politics. Out of this recognition emerged a cross-disciplinary research agenda on ‘frames’ or ‘framing effects’ that stretches back to the 1970s (Rein and Schön, 1977; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Framing in this context refers to the way by which people devise and adopt a particular conceptualization of an issue—e.g. healthcare as a ‘right’, or health care as a ‘benefit’ from the state. The central premise of framing theory is that a policy issue can be understood from numerous perspectives, with implications for multiple sets of values or considerations.

Frames can be specific and only pertinent to the issue at hand, or can be more generic in nature, with applicability across issues (de Vreese, 2012; Entman, 2004). Constructing frames for issues involves the work of “selecting, naming and categorizing” (or indeed *not* selecting, naming or categorizing some elements) to construct the socio-political world, as well as the work of “storytelling” to build a coherent narrative for a policy agenda (van Hulst and Yanow, 2014). To Entman (1993) “to frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient. . .in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). Framing can be powerful because when individuals think about a policy choice, they base their assessment on the connections they draw to their core beliefs (Brewer and Gross, 2005; Feldman and Zaller, 1992).

Framing is thus accomplished by emphasizing certain features of a policy issue, such as its likely effects or its relationship to important values, which can influence individuals to focus on those particular considerations (Jacoby, 2000). This has led researchers to test ‘framing effects’—when small changes in the presentation of an issue produce changes of opinion or an evaluation of an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Framing effects are important to study because frames highlight some aspects of reality while excluding other elements, which might lead individuals to interpret issues differently (Borah, 2011). Indeed, there is considerable evidence across a range of issues—including government spending (Jacoby, 2000), campaign finance rules (Grant and Rudolph, 2003),

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