

# Building a good-neighbor policy between livestock industry and communities

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Economist Peter Goldsmith has extensively studied the economic benefits of the livestock industry in Illinois, but it wasn't until he attended a public hearing proposing the siting of a large livestock facility and heard the comments from members of the community, that he realized the need for new strategies that would elevate the conversation and meet the needs of everyone involved.

"Sitting in that hearing I became aware of a disconnect between the industry owner/operators and the community members," said Goldsmith, a University of Illinois agricultural and consumer economist in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences. "It sounded like two different conversations."

Through the Freedom of Information Act Goldsmith obtained the transcripts from public hearings on proposals to site three different confined [animal feeding](#) operations (CAFOs) in Illinois. In analyzing the textual data, he coded 589 statements from people in attendance at the hearings concerning the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the proposal into categories relating to the legitimacy of the facility and themes, such as children, property value, health, air and [water pollution](#), and [animal welfare](#).

Goldsmith heard the community voicing their pragmatic concerns, while the livestock facility owners/managers focused on the eight criteria required by the Livestock Management and Facilities Act (LMFA) to site a CAFO. Examining the actual words that were spoken at public

hearings clearly demonstrated that the conflict arose because each side saw the problems from different perspectives.

"The owner/managers must address the law. They're doing their due diligence," Goldsmith said. The problem is that the community has different concerns—concerns that may or may not always be factual, but concerns nonetheless."

Goldsmith said that more and better communication will help both the owner/managers and the community members reconcile important issues. It requires validation from both sides and being factual is the key.

"There have been a number of cases of CAFOs bringing community members onto their farm, or inviting them to visit other farms to see their operation and the various technologies—kind of an educational field trip," Goldsmith said. The reverse is extremely valuable as well. He recommended that managers visit community members in their homes to experience first-hand what it is like being a neighbor. In this way, common experiences are built, communication expands, and the conversation becomes more factual so goals and objectives can be specified.

"The community is expressing issues relating to odor and health, and it's important that businesses understand those and that the community verifies those so that it's not an emotional issue that becomes either exaggerated or understated. There are some examples of this happening, but it needs to be built in as a routine part of the process," he said.

Goldsmith said that although the LMFA is an efficient and effective regulation for the construction of livestock facilities, businesses and neighbors might go the extra mile to get to know each other's concerns and see the siting first-hand from another's perspective.

"There's too much at stake not to. What I realized is that we need to work at consensus building, education, listening and learning from both sides, to develop a good working relationship," he said.

Goldsmith said that some of the conflict that occurs at the public hearings may be exacerbated by the fact that the community often comes into the process late.

"The LMFA, based on good engineering practice, requires that business managers do a lot of the work before the community is even brought into the conversation," Goldsmith said. "With such a great development opportunity, we should engage the community early and say, 'let's work together on this.' I'm not naïve enough to believe that this will solve everything. It's a very complex and emotional problem, but I think it would at least help the process move in the right direction," he said.

Although Goldsmith's research dealt with siting livestock facilities, he recognized that these same problems can be seen with proposals for shopping malls, schools, airports, wind farms, and other similar facilities that affect communities.

"This is part of a comprehensive research program that looked at more than just the direct [economic benefits](#) of the [livestock industry](#) in Illinois," Goldsmith said. "We had looked at the economic impact and saw what a CAFO does for communities, taxes, labor markets, input suppliers, and lots of spill overs that are quite good," Goldsmith said. "The research recognized that the industry is very productive and efficient, but this study showed that it's also about being a good neighbor."

**More information:** "Outlining a Strategic Legitimacy Assessment Method: The Case of the Illinois Livestock Industry" will be as published in an upcoming issue of *Agriculture and Human Values*.

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