



# Spatial Economics Research Centre

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## Shout if you don't want to go faster

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NIMBYism is one of the major concerns in transport planning. Airports, motorways or high speed rail lines may be desirable nationally, but are heavily opposed locally. The typical argument is that the local population would be exposed to unjustifiable levels of noise, pollution or congestion.

NIMBYism often feels like a British speciality. When the consultation for the UK's High Speed Two line closed last month, [DFT officials had a whopping 40,000 responses to wade through](#), the majority of which are - apparently - objections. Conservative Party donors living near the proposed route [have threatened to withdraw funding](#) if the coalition pushes forward with the project. [Even the Queen has apparently joined the protest](#), worrying that the train will scare the horses at Stoneleigh Park, an important equestrian centre.

For policymakers the obvious question is: how to weigh the (long term) interests of broader society against the (short term) costs incurred by locals? This is a difficult choice, made harder by the fact that some communities and interest groups are much better than others at organising and pushing their points.

To see the problem, let's take a closer look at high speed rail. [My own research](#) suggests that high speed rail lines have the potential to bring jobs and economic wealth to the regions they serve. Others are [more sceptical](#). The public economics literature suggests that material, as well as intangible interests are also in play. The [home voter hypothesis](#) has argued that property owners will generally support projects they expect to increase the value of their properties (and vice versa). Thus they have a strong incentive to organise their interests and influence political decisions.

Some [new SERC research on airports](#) confirms this, showing property owners are much more concerned about aircraft noise than renters. In 2008 Berlin ran a public referendum on closing the city's historic Tempelhof airport. Passenger numbers at Tempelhof were low, so noise was a marginal issue. Support for keeping Tempelhof open was more than twice the city average - in neighbourhoods close to where the replacement terminal was due to open in 2012. Not surprisingly, these are areas dominated by owner-occupied single-family housing.

What do we take from this? NIMBYism is a complex melange of various interests, and complaints about environmental stress may partly mask vested capital interests. Balancing costs and benefits of transport projects between society and locality is a challenging task. We certainly don't want to leave the decision to those who shout the loudest.

Posted by Gabriel Ahlfeldt on [Wednesday, August 24, 2011](#)

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