

Funding Strategies

RENTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Having run two levy proposals and a bond measure in the March 2008 election, Renton School District found itself in an interesting situation. The District's Education Maintenance and Operations Levy and a Technology Levy both passed with an overwhelming 62 and 60 percent of the vote, respectively. In the same election, the \$150 million "Building for a Lifetime of Learning" School Improvement Bond was supported by a majority of voters, but failed to meet the required 60 percent supermajority by only 78 votes.

We talked with Randy Matheson, Executive Director, Community Relations for the Renton School District, about the district's decision to place the same bond issue before voters two short months later in the May 2008 election – and their plan to earn the additional votes needed for success.

"AHEAD OF THE CURVE" MARKETING

Over the past 10 years, our school district has developed a great working relationship with the community through participation in a unique and highly successful collaborative approach to marketing Renton. In 1997, the City of Renton, in conjunction with the Greater Renton Chamber of Commerce, Renton Technical College, Valley Medical Center, Renton School District and the Renton Visitor's Connection, launched a community marketing campaign. The mission was to collectively market the Renton community to recruit quality companies and diversify Renton's employment base.

When companies or residents consider locating in Renton, they look at the community as a whole: schools, parks, housing, amenities, higher education, public safety, health, and medical care. Our goal is to collectively market our product, Renton, to help us maintain a healthy community.

The group developed a brand, *Renton. Ahead of the Curve*, to promote a consistent identity that builds on the appeal of the community's residential, educational and business opportunities and positions the community for future success. This theme captures our community, and the innovation and creativity of all key stakeholders. By leveraging marketing dollars, the stakeholders collectively promote Renton as an outstanding place to work, live, learn, shop, visit and play.

Like most school districts, the majority of our voters are women over 65 who don't typically have much connection to school other than what they read, hear, or see. Our collaborative brand outreach keeps the Renton School District in front of all residents. When it comes time for bond and levy elections, people already know quite a bit about Renton School District.





Joint marketing strategies include:

- Three episodes of “The Curve,” a half-hour program featured on local cable television. This video magazine-style format interviews community members and highlights positive aspects of Renton.
- The “Center of Opportunity” marketing video, which celebrates Renton’s economic expansion and showcases the many reasons that Renton is a great place to do business, live, visit, and work.
- Newspaper, television and radio advertisements aimed at target audiences, including a television ad during the Super Bowl XLII pre-game show.
- To promote Renton as an option to businesses thinking of relocating, Renton’s superintendent joined with local business leaders on recruitment trips.

The Renton Community Marketing Campaign has been an overwhelming success. Families are moving into our school district, new investments are being made, and the employment base is diversifying. People are not only talking about Renton, they are making the conscious choice to locate their businesses and families in the community. The campaign has received national recognition, not only for its effectiveness, but also for the unique collaboration and partnership among community stakeholders.

For more information on the Renton Community Marketing Campaign, visit their website: <http://rentonwa.gov/business/default.aspx?id=2608>

DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

Our community has been very supportive in approving the district’s past bond measures. Over the last 15 years, we have replaced all of our 13 elementary schools by razing and rebuilding on the same footprint. The \$150 million bond package requested in 2008 would pay for additional classrooms, and continued improvements and modernizations at middle and high schools to offer current and future students a better place to learn. We had a compelling list of reasons for placing the bond issue before voters, including the fact that approval of the bond measure would not raise tax rates for Renton School District taxpayers. Due to the vast increase in businesses and families that have moved into the district, tax rates are lower, meaning the district can make school building improvements without raising tax rates. Once passed, the total tax rate will remain an estimated \$3.44 per \$1,000 of assessed value, keeping the Renton School District tax rate among the lowest in the region.

Winning support from the majority of voters and failing to reach the required 60 percent supermajority by only 78 votes was a real heartbreaker for members of the citizens' committee who volunteered so much time and effort to put together the advocacy campaign. Once the committee saw the March election results, they reviewed election data while our school board decided whether or not to put the bond package out to revote.

As the citizens' committee crunched election numbers, they learned that only a little more than half of our district's 12,000 parents are registered to vote. Of the approximately 6,500 district parents registered to vote, less than 2,000 actually cast votes in the March election. Even more disappointing, we learned that out of about 1,000 district staff members who live in our district and are eligible to vote, more than 200 failed to cast a ballot.

Once the School Board decided to put the same bond package on the May 20 election, both the district and the citizens' committee used data from the previous election in reaching out to voters we should be able to count on for support. The district incorporated statistics of how many parents and staff voted into informational presentations. People in our district were shocked to hear that so few of our parent and staff members actually voted in the last election. We used the numbers to communicate a strong message that each individual vote counts, and to create a sense of urgency that staff and parents really need to vote.

CONSISTENT MESSAGES



We learned a tough lesson when preparing information for the election ballot. To meet county requirements and avoid electioneering, ballot titles must be prepared by lawyers and approved by the King County Prosecuting Attorney's office. We strategically chose the ballot title "Building for a Lifetime of Learning School Improvement Bond" in order to make a positive impression as opposed to the more typical "General Obligation Bond", which sounds bland and negative. Our School Board approved our proposition title as a way to ask voters to do something meaningful by improving our physical buildings, and at the same time helping students learn for the future.

Upon review, the King County Prosecuting Attorney's office reworded our title back to "General Obligation Bond." We learned from this experience that if a district has an existing plan and a consistent title used for it (such as "Building for a Lifetime of Learning School Construction Program"), they are then able to use the program name as the ballot title. We tried to plead our case, but it was too late as the ballots for the mail-in election had already been printed. The lesson learned is to come up with a title for the school district's capital program early in the planning process so that the county prosecuting attorney's office will accept a customized ballot title that is consistent with the program's name.

PERSONALIZED TACTICS

While the campaign was fortunate to have numerous volunteers, we wanted to convince them that that standing on a street corner waving a sign is not the most constructive or strategic way to get the votes needed to win. The citizens' committee adjusted their original campaign strategy with a few different elements intended to get supporters talking with their neighbors and friends to ask directly for support and to encourage them to vote. This personalized approach gives far greater return than waving a sign—and it pays off in the future to keep volunteers connected and involved in a meaningful way.

For the May election, the goal was to maintain the March election’s original number of “yes” voters and to add enough to put us over the top. To achieve that goal, the citizens committee targeted individual audiences and got volunteers talking to likely supporters with personalized messages. Key strategies included:

Phone bank volunteers called 14,000 registered voters identified as supportive. We had 25 phones set up each night from early April into May to let people know what would be on the ballot and that approval of our bond package would not raise tax rates. Since we had data from the March election, the campaign pulled together lists of staff members registered to vote, sorted according to those who did or did not vote. While the script was exactly the same for both groups of people, those who did not vote in March got a call from the district superintendent – calling as a volunteer – reminding them to please vote in the May election.

Direct Mail communicated benefits of the proposed bond to the same 14,000 voters identified as supportive. The campaign developed a two-page informational brochure, as well as a full-page format postcard tailored for one of three high school service areas. In addition to the standard information as to what is on the ballot and the importance of voting, each of the three different postcards outlined benefits to neighborhood schools, supported by photos of these facilities. We also put together individual flyers for specific groups in the community, such as sports organizations that use our fields, to let them know that the bond package would include track and field renovations as well as renovation of Renton Memorial Stadium. These flyers were a great way to personalize the message for a group of voters who may not have kids in school, but stand to benefit from upgraded athletic facilities.

Doorbelling was increased, with the goal of 1,000 contacts per weekend for the two weekends leading up to the election. People signed up to walk in specific neighborhoods selected based on voting patterns. Volunteers knocked on doors, handed out campaign brochures and asked people to vote in support. Door hangers were left for people not at home.

Personal Postcards were created with the intent of getting 500 in circulation. These small postcards featured the campaign logo and a blank area for supporters to write a personal note of support. The pre-stamped cards were mailed to registered voters they know, asking for support of the bond measure and encouraging them to mail in ballots prior to the election date.

ELECTION OUTCOME

The additional work and personalized attention paid off in the May 20, 2008 election. Renton’s bond measure garnered over 61 percent “yes” votes, putting it well beyond the needed 60 percent supermajority requirement.



*The purpose of
Funding Strategies
is to explore how school
districts secure funding
for projects. Please contact
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more information, or if your
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featured.*

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