

## a tale of two bond elections

While some may characterize current economic conditions as the worst of times since the Great Depression, the November 4, 2008 election will be remembered by two Oregon school districts as the best of times to ask voters to approve significant school bond packages.

In this issue we profile two very different school districts that share in common recent success in passing a bond measure. While there are differences between the districts in size and demographics, both found that consistent and targeted communication resulted in voter support – even in the midst of a challenging economy.

Salem-Keizer School District 24-J enrolls approximately 40,000 students, making it Oregon's second largest school district. The district's facilities include 45 elementary schools, ten middle schools, eight high schools, and four charter schools. Last November, Salem-Keizer's \$242.1 million bond set a new record as the largest single amount of tax money ever approved by voters for an Oregon school district.

Riverdale School District's population of 524 students is housed in two facilities: a fairly new 9-12 high school and a K-8 grade school that was built in 1920. Because the grade school building was nearing the end of its operational life, the district planned a bond measure to replace the aging facility on the same site.

Riverdale's residents voted in November to pass a \$21.5 million bond package, with the majority of the money to be spent on rebuilding the Riverdale grade school facility.

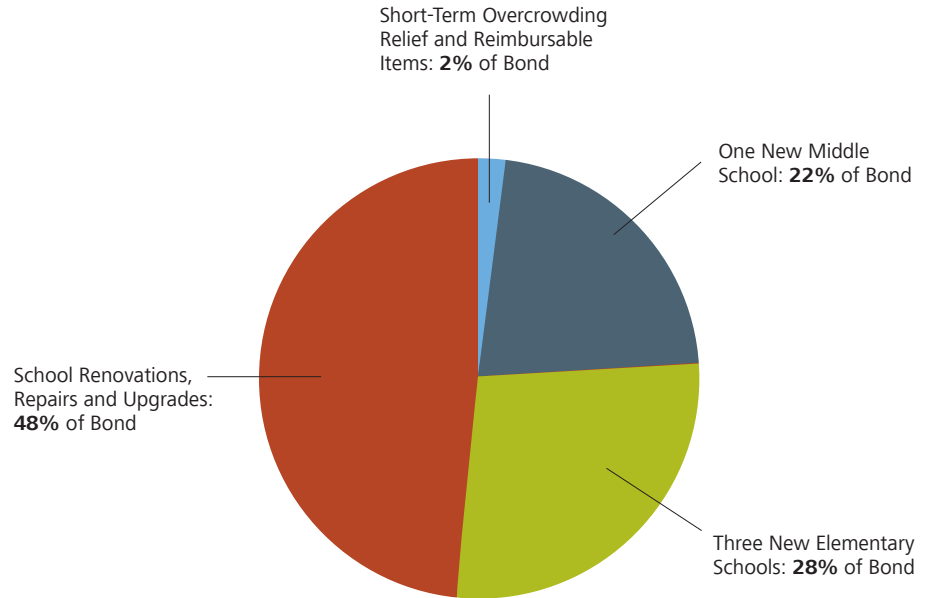
We interviewed Jay Remy, Community Relations and Communications Director for Salem-Keizer School District, and Terry Hoagland, Superintendent of Riverdale School District, to understand what led to their recent successes.

**SALEM-KEIZER SCHOOL DISTRICT 24-J**  
*Jay Remy, Community Relations and Communications Director*

Since our district's last bond measure in 1998, we have steadily grown by an average of about 500 students per year. We were facing a huge need to provide an adequate learning environment for our growing population.

We began an extensive public input process over two years ago with a citizens committee of more than 40 people who analyzed our facilities needs. The outcome was a report with a recommendation to our school board that they consider going for a large bond package in the November





2008 election. We believe that one of the keys to our success with voters is that citizens recommended the bond measure to the school board, rather than the other way around.

Our district understands the importance of research to find out what voters will support and value. It is a waste of time to run a bond measure for something that the community doesn't want. In spring of 2007, we conducted polling to determine what voters would support and to ask where they most wanted to invest the money. We found that people in our community highly valued renovating and taking care of our investment in existing buildings. While there was concern about growth and overcrowding, those issues did not rise to the top.

Once we had a finger on the community's pulse, we looked in more detail at each facility and compiled project lists and cost estimates. We asked the public for input at community meetings, and adjusted the lists accordingly. Because our district is large and growing, the price tag for the entire package was well over \$500 million. We did another poll of what the community was

willing to spend, resulting in a pared down package which had a better chance to pass in the election.

Because the community was involved at every step of the process, the district's bond request was no surprise to voters. We proposed a \$242.1 million bond package to be divided up according to the community's priorities:

#### CHALLENGING ISSUES

Through our community surveys, we had identified trust issues lingering from past administration decisions and our district's portrayal in the local media. Unresolved negative issues can greatly affect a school district, particularly when you are asking voters to trust you with more tax money. For over two years, we worked with our new superintendent to resolve the perceived issues and to rebuild trust. We tackled the issues directly by being frank with the public, asking probing questions of the community, and inviting local media to dig into the facts. We were heartened to get endorsements for our bond package from key local media and chambers of commerce.

Like many districts, our frequent voters tend to be older and 70% of our voters do not currently have kids in school. Getting the bond message out to older voters was challenging. Our forums and community meetings did not get good turnout among the older demographic. For the election to be successful, we had to change the way we were doing outreach.

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**"If voters don't believe you, don't trust you and don't think you will manage their money wisely, you won't succeed."**

*Jay Remy, Community Relations and Communications Director Salem Kaiser School District*

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About three years ago, we started visiting local service clubs, senior centers, church groups, and other gathering places for older voters. We were reaching hundreds of people each month by going out to them rather than hoping they would come to us. It is important not to wait for the election season to make community connections. We have learned to take a



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long term view of community interaction rather than showing up only to ask voters for more money.

**CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON**

As 2008 unfolded, the economic picture was worsening with the mortgage meltdown and skyrocketing gas prices. The November 2008 election was shaping up to be a political battle with the hotly-contested presidential election, as well as key congressional elections. We were worried about whether the earlier polling data would hold true given the enormous economic and political pressures.

We ramped up informational meetings just prior to the election. Our superintendent and volunteers were out talking with community groups every week night the entire month of October. We augmented our district-wide bond information with publications focused on geographic areas, highlighting what each facility would get from the package.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Passing a bond request is more about relationships than it is about communication tools. Of course you will have a website and brochures and mailers, but don't make those the primary focus. The key is to take a hard look early on at where you stand with your community.

Invest in polling to find out what people are thinking about your district. At the end of the day, it is a vote of confidence or no confidence in the district. If voters don't believe you, don't trust you and don't think you will manage their money wisely, you won't succeed. Find out what the community thinks about the district through opinion research, and then start as early as possible to repair damaged perceptions or relationships.

**RIVERDALE SCHOOL DISTRICT 51J**

*Terry Hoagland, Superintendent*

It is critical that our school facilities provide the physical environment to further Riverdale School District's vision, mission and core values. As a small but growing district comprised of one fairly new high school and one aging grade school, funds that should

have been supporting educational programs were increasingly being directed to repair the antiquated grade school building. For that reason, the majority of our \$21.5 million November 2008 bond request was proposed to renovate our K-8 grade school.

**COMMUNITY PROCESS**

When I started in July 2008 as superintendent for Riverdale, the community was already well underway with planning for the bond package. Committees had been meeting to address facility and educational components, design issues, and other critical aspects. Our school board's decision to introduce a bond measure was based on extensive planning and research. Key steps we undertook to craft our bond proposal were:

**Conducting Engineering and**

**Architectural Studies** - Our grade school is comprised of the main 1920's building and five additional buildings that had developed over time. We hired architects and engineers to rate the condition of each building, resulting in a recommendation that most of the buildings undergo major renovation or replacement.





**Gathering Neighborhood Input** – We held seven community meetings to share information about the school’s condition and to solicit feedback. A telephone survey of the community and teacher interviews provided additional information.

**Forming a Renovation Advisory Committee** – A citizens committee was formed to review facility conditions, community priorities, project options, and cost estimates. The committee recommended that the main building, classroom wings and art building be renovated or replaced to modernize the campus.

**Consulting with Financial Experts** – To secure the most cost effective levy rate, we consulted with professional bond underwriters and financial advisors to assess the bond options and tax implications.

We worked very hard to provide a variety of ways for the community to participate and to ask questions. We knew it was critical to give people time to think through the issues and to have a voice in

shaping our bond request. To that end, we scheduled coffee events, small group meetings, and large publicized meetings. The district put a big focus on using our website as a primary communication tool.

**BUILDING TRUST**

In reviewing Riverdale’s history of passing bond measures, I learned that the district had passed a bond earlier in this decade by a very slim margin. I also learned that the district had developed several concerns about that project and had lost valuable trust with voters.

It is critical that voters trust those in charge to make the right decisions to complete projects in a fiscally-responsible manner. Given these concerns, we created a Citizens Financial Safeguards Committee comprised of neighborhood financial and construction experts willing to share their expertise. Now that the bond has passed, this committee meets regularly with the design and construction team, and the Board Steering Committee to evaluate project expenditures and avoid cost overruns.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Being new to the district, I had to hit the ground running to understand Riverdale’s history with bond measures. The most important lesson learned was to listen to the community, try to understand where they are coming from, and address their concerns specifically. If the community doesn’t feel good about how the district has handled things, come up with a way and group to directly address that issue.

The purpose of [Funding Strategies](#) is to explore how school districts secure funding for projects. Please contact Mahlum Architects for more information, or if your district would like to be featured.

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