

the little school district that could

Remember the story of “The Little Engine that Could”? Like a little train mustering all of its energy to crest a steep hill, proposing a bond package to voters in the current economy requires positive energy and optimism – and a capital improvements proposal that is well planned to move student achievement in the right direction.



For Parkrose School District’s May 2011 bond package to get “over the top” in terms of yes votes, it required planning well in advance and hard work by countless volunteers. The story ended on a dramatic note as Parkrose School District’s election was too close to call until the final recount verified a win by only six votes.

We interviewed Parkrose School District’s superintendent, Dr. Karen Fischer Gray, to learn more about what it took to push their recent bond election over the top and win with voters.

Discovering the Power of Education:

The Parkrose School Community provides a premiere education that unlocks the potential in each student.

DIVERSE DISTRICT

Comprised of 15 square miles located within the City of Portland, Parkrose School District enrolls approximately 3,500 students in six schools. The District’s enrollment does not tend to fluctuate as the area is fairly landlocked for additional development. Parkrose has a strong, stable tax base including small businesses, family farms, industrial facilities and Portland International Airport.

Parkrose School District has a strong focus on enhancing student achievement. Because the District has become a destination location for international students, it has extremely diverse demographics. The District’s goal is for all students in its diverse population to be engaged and successful on their way to earning high school diplomas.

The Academy for Architecture, Construction & Engineering (ACE) is one example of Parkrose’s focus on student achievement. Parkrose is partnering with four other school districts to offer high school students the opportunity to attend ACE as a new way to integrate math, language arts and science in a “hands on” project based environment.

EARLY PLANNING

When Parkrose began planning the bond proposal in 2009, the District’s goal was that every part of the bond package be structured to improve learning and help kids get more out of their experience as students. The District’s planning process started with a long range facilities plan that resulted in a preliminary list totalling \$100 million of recommended capital improvements.

Parkrose School District's message to the community was consistent and clear: We will be transparent, responsible, responsive and will do exactly what we said we will do in this bond proposal.



Because the District has very low debt and an existing bond is scheduled to retire later this year, Parkrose analyzed options to structure a 2011 bond package without raising the tax rate. The District arrived at a financial target of \$63 million for a bond proposal that focused on the projects most important to student achievement.

Parkrose conducted a poll in the summer of 2010 and learned that voters wanted upgrades to technology and security systems, as well as asbestos abatement and maintenance in existing school facilities. While the initial list of potential projects included work at Parkrose High School, polling data showed a strong perception in the minds of voters that the high school is new, it is complete, and the community would not support additional expenditures at the facility. Because the District had committed to really listening to voters, anything that polled badly was removed from the bond package.

Anything that was strongly supported – or even a potential “push point” voters might be willing to support – was left in the package.

The District held several community charrettes with professional facilitators assisting in the effort to trim the \$100 million preliminary project list to a \$63 million bond package the community would support. Through the process, it became obvious what voters were likely to support – and that is what was included in the final bond request.

In May 2011, Parkrose School District asked voters to approve a \$63 million bond package for the following projects:

- :: Replacement of Parkrose Middle School
- :: Renovation/Additions to four elementary schools
- :: District wide technology, security, maintenance and repair

CHALLENGING ISSUES

While Parkrose has had a good track record of passing school bonds, they knew that this election could be challenging given the slow economy. The District also knew that some voters had not been happy with the 1994 bond package that funded the new Parkrose High School, presenting another potential challenge to overcome.

The situation became more complicated when Parkrose learned that a neighboring school district was running an extremely large bond package in the same election. Some Parkrose community members became confused and had difficulty understanding which bond package applied to their property.

INFORMATIONAL OUTREACH

In keeping with state law, district personnel are only allowed to provide information to the public on behalf of the school district and are not allowed to use school district resources to advocate in any way for a bond package. The District posted a new section on their website that was very effective in outlining the components of the bond package, and also provided detailed information through a “Q&A” format.



The “Q&A” format was an effective tool used to help clarify for voters in Parkrose which school district’s bond proposal would apply to which properties. The District also did informational outreach to Parent Teacher Organizations, community service groups, Parkrose Business Alliance, and neighborhood churches – targeting any place people were likely to gather within the School District to directly answer questions and address concerns.

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Dr. Karen Fischer Gray, Superintendent

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CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

The District is quick to credit the dedicated parents who came together to form the citizen’s advocacy committee (CAC), “YES for Parkrose,” as the real heroes in this story. According to superintendent Gray, “It was due to the efforts of about 20 very committed CAC members that this bond passed.”

The CAC members were assisted at a high level by a Bond Coordinating Council of 60-75 people who met monthly for a year to flesh out the campaign design. The Council met “off the clock” after hours, and was comprised of principals, directors, school board members, parents, teachers, and union representatives.

Based on advice from campaign consultants, the committee focused on getting likely yes voters to turn in ballots without attracting potential no voters. To that end, the CAC decided against using lawn signs or banners until the last few days prior to the election date.

Key elements of the “YES for Parkrose” campaign strategy included:

- :: Emphasis on individuals going door to door and talking with voters
- :: Effective outreach by Spanish-speaking parents
- :: Fundraising resulting in \$25,000 campaign budget
- :: Website and Facebook pages
- :: Four crucial mailings to everyone in the district
- :: Collection and delivery of ballots

ELECTION RESULTS

While the story of Parkrose School District’s 2011 bond election has a happy ending, it was an absolute cliffhanger to get the final results! As votes were tallied, the count went back and forth between a high of 24 yes votes and a low of 6 no votes. On May 11, the District was informed that they had won by seven votes – but then a recount was called 11 days later. Final victory for the Parkrose School Bond was officially declared on June 3rd.



This experience demonstrated the overall accuracy of the election process. Superintendent Gray watched the recount of 5,500 votes done by hand – only one vote was lost because the voter had marked both yes and no on the same ballot, and the machine was incapable of recognizing that mistake.

Subsequent to the election, Parkrose was able to share another piece of good news. When the District sold the bonds, they obtained a quarter of the bonding through Federal Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZAB). This program provided Parkrose with \$15 million of the bond at zero interest, reducing the bond term from 30 years to 26 years and dropping the associated property tax rate from \$1.25 per thousand of assessed value to \$1.09 per thousand of assessed value. Thanks to the zero-interest QZAB bonds, the District secured a net gain of \$1 million more than what voters approved at a lower property tax rate with a shorter payback term.

LESSONS LEARNED

The most critical factors to passing the Parkrose bond package were:

- :: Planning well in advance
- :: Listening to the community
- :: Focusing on likely yes voters
- :: Knocking on lots of doors

“My best advice in how to pass a bond or levy is to get out there and talk to people. Really invest in knowing the people in your district to find out what they will support – and then go for what they will support,” says Superintendent Gray. “The face-to-face contact by our dedicated parents is the real reason Parkrose won this difficult election. I truly believe that we would have lost at a tremendous rate had the parents not gone door-to-door.”

Now that the bond has passed, Parkrose School District will focus on delivering the bond projects as promised to their community, communicating to constituents very intentionally and explicitly both progress and results.

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

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Photos courtesy of Parkrose School District.