

## a bold decision pays off in a down economy

In 2010, Forest Grove School District decided to put a \$65.3 million bond measure before voters to replace an aging elementary school, to expand and remodel portions of Forest Grove High School, and to complete safety, security, energy efficiency and deferred maintenance projects district-wide.

Forest Grove School District previously went to its voters in 2006 requesting a smaller bond package that failed by a slim margin. Given the economic downturn and the potential volatility of the 2010 midterm election, the District might have questioned whether or not to put a bond package on the ballot. But with a failing elementary building in desperate need of replacement and a high school housing 1,900 students in a facility built for about 1,100 students, the need was greater than ever.

We spoke with Connie Potter, Forest Grove School District's Director of Communications, to understand the decision to run a bond measure in an uncertain economic and political climate, and to learn about the strategy which won 53.9% YES votes in the November 2010 election.





## MAKING THE DECISION

We first convened a facilities task force of community members, business leaders and district staff to review our situation. The task force scoured lists of needs provided by the principals and staff at each school, visited each building, then put together a list of options totaling over \$100 million of work. The options were prioritized, resulting in a final package of \$65.3 million for the November 2010 bond measure.

The interesting thing is that the 2006 bond request that failed was \$49.8 million. In the face of much uncertainty, the package we decided to put before voters in 2010 was significantly larger than the previously unsuccessful request.

While our community is very supportive of the school district, money is really an issue to voters and people don't automatically pass new taxes. We have found in past elections that bond measures tend to pass if the need is demonstrated effectively to voters and if there is a previous bond retiring – so voting YES now will not increase taxes.

Last spring, we conducted a survey to determine the potential level of community support for a bond package. The survey was absolutely key to understanding what is important to voters in our school district.

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We learned some things from the survey that were not especially favorable. We floated the idea of a \$70 million bond, which earned only 42% approval from survey participants – not very good odds. But when we asked whether people would approve a \$70 million bond package if we could do it without increasing their property taxes, the approval rating went up to 65%! In addition to the “no new taxes” message, survey participants also looked favorably on installing video

equipment at all district schools to increase safety and security, as well as energy efficiency measures district wide. Based on the survey, we knew that if we structured the package correctly, we had a good chance of passing it in the November election.

## CREATING THE STRATEGY

Our district was fortunate because one of our existing bonds is close to retiring, allowing us to structure the 2010 bond package so that this new bond would replace the one being paid off. Here is the message we sent to our community:

“Because Measure 34-178 would replace the 1994 bond, a YES VOTE on this bond means the school tax rate will still decrease. The tax rate for the proposed bond is 34 cents per \$1,000 lower than the rate for the bond that is retiring. The owners of a home assessed at \$150,000 would pay about \$51 less per year in school taxes than they do now.”

To make the financial package even more attractive, our school district was already approved to finance a portion of the proposed bond at 0% interest using federal Qualified School Construction Bonds (QSCB).



**Images:**  
 Renderings of new Joseph  
 Gale Elementary School,  
 funded by Forest Grove  
 School District's successful  
 2010 bond

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*Connie Potter, Director of Communications  
 Forest Grove School District*

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Using the QSCB funds, we were able to structure the bond to save about \$15 million in interest costs over the life of the bond. However, the federal program was scheduled to end Dec. 31, 2010 which added urgency to passing the bond in November.

We knew that our biggest challenge was the stagnant economy, so we addressed that directly and made it a focus of all campaign communications. Our campaign literature and presentations asked the same questions, “Why Go for a Bond? Why Now?” We consistently answered our own questions with three compelling reasons:

- :: **Nothing supports a strong community and a strong economy more than good schools.** The need is so great and we owe it to our students to provide a good education.
- :: **No increase in taxes.** How often do you get an opportunity to accomplish all of these important things and not raise taxes?
- :: **0% interest.** This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for federal QSBC bonds at 0% interest.

#### COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

The stars all aligned for us on the financial structure of the package, but even then, it was not an easy sell to voters. People didn’t doubt the bond improvements were needed, but with so many lost jobs, houses in foreclosure, and the economy in the tank, we knew that financial concerns would make it hard for our community to vote YES.

We were thrilled when our bond package passed with a 53.9% YES vote! We had no idea what the margin would be, but given many people’s current feelings about government and taxes in general – combined with the struggling economy – this was a huge win for our community.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

##### USE SURVEY RESULTS WISELY

A survey is critical to know what people are thinking and feeling about your school district and bond proposal. While it can be tempting to ignore survey results that don’t tell you what you want to hear, it was key for us to not only

conduct the survey – but to really listen to it. For example, the survey told us that people were interested in energy efficiency, so we talked about those projects as part of the ongoing communication. Because of the unemployment rate, local jobs were viewed favorably. We structured smaller projects within the bond to allow local contractors opportunities to bid for work.

##### FOCUS ON A SINGLE MESSAGE

Whether on paper, in a community presentation, on a sign, or in a one-on-one conversation, we focused on a single message: INVEST IN KIDS WITHOUT RAISING TAXES. It is tempting to talk about all the different things a bond can accomplish, but too much information is overwhelming to people. There is also a danger that people will zero in on the one little thing they don’t like in the package – then vote against that. The key is to have a focused and consistent message.



### **DON'T AUTOMATICALLY DO WHAT YOU DID IN PREVIOUS CAMPAIGNS**

In a departure from the last few campaigns, we did not do phone banking to identify YES voters and make sure they turned in ballots. With many people using cell phones and voice mail, it is nearly impossible to make personal contact with voters by phone. We also felt that given the tone of the midterm election campaigns, our voters would be bombarded with phone calls and voicemails hoping to gain support for various candidates and ballot measures. Rather than add to the potential irritation and overall noise, we decided that the phone was not a tool to use in this election.

For similar reasons, we limited mass mailings to voters. The district sent out just one printed piece of information early in the process and the campaign advocacy group did just two mailed pieces.

### **LEVERAGE GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING**

For this bond measure, we went back to community-based person-to-person campaigning. We paired up one person from the school district for information with one person from the campaign committee for advocacy, then did more than 50 presentations to civic groups, coffee klatches, etc. We went to everyone willing to listen as a group and then asked each of those in attendance to go tell friends and neighbors. Our advocacy group did a great job getting visibility at local events like football games and parades, and using those opportunities to talk with more people one-on-one.

### **WIN ONE VOTE AT A TIME**

We knew that there was a potential issue with some neighbors who had concerns that rebuilding our elementary school on the same site would result in siting the new building closer to their homes. From the 2006 bond effort, we knew that a small group of people didn't like the

proposed new location and were inclined to be negative about the whole package. We spent a lot of time working with these neighbors to come up with changes that would make them happy and also serve the district's needs. While this was not a large number of people, we were hoping to halt negative conversations and pick up any "yes" votes we could along the way.

### **HELP PEOPLE SEE THE NEED**

Since we had previously asked for a bond to replace our aging elementary school, you might have thought our voters would already know that the school building was in pretty bad shape. However, only 28% of people surveyed in 2010 gave the building a negative rating and 51% were not sure how to rate its physical condition. It became clear that we needed to show our voters the real condition of our old elementary school. Whenever we could, we held community and school board meetings at Joseph Gale Elementary School to get more people inside the facility to see beyond its tidy exterior into the true need to replace the school.

### **SOMETIMES YOU CAN OVERCOME THINGS**

We wanted to build another gym at Forest Grove High School but found in our survey that this idea was not popular with people. Support for the bond went down drastically when a new gym was included in the bond package. We thought long and hard about not including the gym, but we felt strongly that a high school gym is not a frill and it is certainly not just for athletics. We were able to gain support from our community by talking about it as much more than just a gym, but as additional instructional space for overcrowded physical education classes, which are a graduation requirement just like science or math. We also committed to significant community use of the gym space for concerts and other special events to serve everyone, not just the families with kids in school.

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