

moving forward in the new economy

As the U.S. economy slowly recovers, school districts continue to find it challenging to convince cash-strapped voters to support new tax measures. We profile two school districts whose Capital Projects Levy packages resonated with voters in the February 2011 election.



In this issue, we turn to Western Washington for a couple of case studies that feature a mix of proven strategies and new ideas to build broad voter support for their districts' tax measures:

Lake Washington School District won over 60% approval of a \$65.4 million package to build additions to two high schools and a new secondary school emphasizing Science/Technology/Engineering/Math (STEM).

Central Kitsap School District's \$58 million levy passed with 52.79% approval for district-wide repairs and upgrades, replacement of one elementary, renovation of another elementary and relocation of transportation/central services. The District will receive an additional \$31 million in state and federal funds for a total package of \$89 million.

LAKE WASHINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Located east of Seattle between Lake Washington and the Cascade Mountains, Lake Washington School District (LWSD) encompasses Kirkland, Redmond, and Sammamish, Washington. LWSD is the sixth largest school district in the state of Washington, serving over 24,000 students in 50 schools.

We interviewed Kathryn Reith, Communications Director for Lake Washington School District, to understand what led to the District's recent election success.

START WITH A CLEAR VISION

LWSD's long term vision provided a foundation on which to make decisions for its capital levy package. The District is working to bring to life *Vision 2020: Every Student Future Ready: Prepared for College, Prepared for the Global Workplace, Prepared for Personal Success*.

To make Vision 2020 more tangible, LWSD revised its Student Profile to encompass the knowledge, skills and attributes that every student needs to be future ready.

The District's Guiding Principles of "Connected, Valued and Challenged" also define the learning environments necessary for all students to reach the same goal.

Unlike many other districts with declining enrollment, over 600 more students enrolled in LWSD in the fall of 2010 compared to the previous year – and LWSD anticipates 500 more students enrolling each year for the next five years. This additional enrollment is already causing overcrowding at elementary schools. Given the lack of available space, the District needed to make some physical changes to be positioned to fulfill its Vision 2020 principles.

In the fall of 2012, the District will change from its current K-6, 7-9 and 10-12 configuration to elementary schools serving grades K-5, middle schools for grades 6-8 and high schools with grades 9-12. While the decision to change was made for academic reasons, if no change was made the District would need new classroom space for about 1,500 elementary students (the equivalent of

three new schools) in the fall of 2012. With reconfiguration, the District expects it will instead need space for about 800 high schools students in the fall of 2012.

The District asked voters in February 2010 to invest \$256 million in a 30-year bond measure that would have provided space for expected enrollment growth, prevented overcrowding, and provided comprehensive, long-term facility solutions. Voters did not approve the bond measure by the required 60% majority (though 56% voted in favor). With overcrowding already apparent and projected to increase, LWSD regrouped to gather input on what more voters would be willing to support.

Lake Washington School District and their Citizens Committee mixed tried and true strategies with new technology for expanded outreach.

ASK FOR COMMUNITY INPUT

The District conducted a survey prior to the failed 2010 bond measure and found out that the community envisioned the ideal size for a high school as no more than 2000 students. Survey participants expressed strong support for a “choice” program by building a Science/Technology/Engineering/Math (STEM) school on property already owned by the District.

LWSD’s voters had been very supportive in passing earlier bond packages in 1998 and 2006. Failure of the 2010 bond package came with a strong message that given the economic climate, the community was still supportive but wanted the District to reevaluate how much money was needed to cover the basics to ease imminent overcrowding.

In September 2010, The District held three public workshops to request community input on meeting the space needs. The public was invited to get information, ask questions, take a survey and make comments. The survey was also available online at the LWSD website. The synthesis of nearly 1,400 survey responses resulted in a recommendation for the 2011 levy package.

ARTICULATE SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

LWSD felt that a capital projects levy would have a better chance of success compared to a bond measure. In Washington State, a capital projects levy requires only a simple majority of over 50% approval rather than the over 60% approval required to pass a bond. However, a capital levy is typically smaller than a bond and is on a compressed timeline with a “pay as you go” formula rather than paying bond interest. A levy would result in long-term savings and align with the district’s conservative financial practices.

The District chose to delay some capital projects – such as building a new elementary school and modernizing another high school. LWSD listened to significant public input on the 2011 levy package and identified the following preferences which reflect community priorities. When possible:

- :: No high school grows over 2,000 (general capacity is 1,600)
- :: No high school double-shifts students
- :: Minimize portable additions at high schools
- :: Minimize new busing
- :: Build permanent classrooms, core gyms and cafeterias, while maintaining current space dedicated to specialized programs

RETHINK CAMPAIGN TOOLS

LWSD provided information to constituents while Lake Washington Citizens Levy Committee advocated with voters to support the capital projects levy. The District and the citizens committee mixed tried and true strategies – such as face to face meetings – with new technology for expanded outreach.

While the advocacy group’s past campaigns tended to emphasize YES voters, this time the group knew they needed to be more broadly visible and engage the whole community. Innovative campaign strategies included:

- :: A website and Facebook page for the Citizens Committee to communicate key messages, answer questions, and coordinate activities
- :: PAYPAL button on the website as part of fundraising to encourage more online campaign contributions
- :: Bright yellow “Vote Yes LW Schools” buttons for individuals to wear, attracting attention and opening conversations
- :: Sign waving by students in front of the high school and at other locations, demonstrating that kids care about the levy and visibly participate
- :: Personal “realtor to realtor” outreach facilitated by a realtor member of the committee for visibility at chamber of commerce events and in the general community

The District was pleasantly surprised that the margin of victory for the 2011 Capital Projects Levy was well over 60%, as the general expectation prior to the election was for much lower returns of closer to 50% voter approval.



Central Kitsap School District's well documented capital levy plan transformed some former skeptics who had not supported the previous school support levy into public voices advocating for the district.

CENTRAL KITSAP SCHOOL DISTRICT

Central Kitsap School District (CKSD) covers 110 square miles in and around Silverdale, Washington. The District serves about 11,600 students in 21 schools in the heart of the western Puget Sound region.

To learn more about the District's recent win with voters, we talked with:

- :: Greg Lynch, CKSD Superintendent
- :: Bob Ramsey, Citizens Levy Committee "CK Kids Matter" CoChair
- :: David Beil, CKSD Director of Community Relations
- :: Richard Best, CKSD Director of Construction, Facilities and Maintenance

LINK STUDENT SUCCESS WITH GREAT FACILITIES

Central Kitsap School District recognizes all citizens are critical to achieving the District's mission of "All Students Learning Well." Due to community perceptions and economic conditions, CKSD has not passed a capital projects measure

since 1992. Over the last few years, the District has worked to accentuate the positive results of academic success and student accomplishments and to educate the community about the relationship between a great building for learning and strong support for teachers and kids.

The following is an excerpt from CKSD's 36-year Long Range Facilities Plan:

"Local citizens, in partnership with the State of Washington, have a significant investment in our educational and support facilities. Safe, healthy, efficient, and well-maintained facilities provide a positive environment for our students, staff and community. Through financial support, leadership, and volunteerism, our citizens assist in providing an outstanding education for our students. The ability to maximize the lifecycle of our facilities in a systematic fashion, while minimizing the financial burden on our community, is critical to the success of our students."

INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY EARLY IN THE PROCESS

From previous election losses, CKSD learned that they needed to better connect the District's internal planning with community members who were asked to support levy and bond proposals. The District and Citizens Committee began work in 2007 to form a well-organized group including the superintendent and district staff, union leadership, PTSA membership and community representatives to craft an overall strategy.

The group commissioned a professional survey to ask for community input on the levy package. Survey results provided unbiased information and analytics that the committee used to craft their strategy.

Participants spent several years putting together a detailed 36-year facilities plan to address all CKSD buildings. The plan – comprised of 15 chapters and five appendices – was based on extensive research by 70+ individuals, from multiple committees, for a total of 3,835 work hours.

The 2011 Capital Projects Levy was characterized as the first phase of a

36-year facilities plan which clearly explained how the district would manage projects year to year. Because the process was rigorous in looking at issues from many different perspectives, nearly all of the community's questions about the levy were anticipated in advance and readily answered with facts. The well documented plan transformed some former skeptics who had not supported the District's previous school support levy into public voices advocating for the district. These former "naysayers" wrote letters to the local newspaper explaining what had changed their minds and why they were encouraging others to vote YES on the Capital Projects Levy.

UNDERSTAND VOTER DEMOGRAPHICS

Unlike other Washington State school districts, CKSD defines itself as "military-centric." Three Navy bases are the area's major employers: the Naval Base - Kitsap; the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, Keyport Division; and the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Bremerton. Twenty-six percent of the District's students are military family dependents and 50% are children of families economically dependent on the Navy.

It is generally accepted that the most supportive voters for school elections are the parent population because they are direct recipients of services. CKSD has a special challenge as 50% of the District's parents are military population. While the military parents are very supportive, few are Washington State residents who can vote in the District's elections.

The CKSD community at large (non-military) carries an unusually large burden in supporting its schools, which complicates efforts to pass tax increases. Because the Citizens Committee was well organized and represented a broad base of the community, they were able to spread out tasks to many people who helped implement the campaign strategy.

USE 21ST CENTURY CAMPAIGN TOOLS

It was imperative for the campaign to reach out to the largest group of parents and community members possible. The Citizens Committee contacted every single parent/guardian in the district through postcards and phone calls. The District's union members strongly supported the levy proposal with consistent payroll contributions/deductions to help fund the campaign. Payroll contributions will continue to accumulate to fund future campaigns, which will free up time for volunteers who would have had to do additional fundraising to support new measures.

The campaign used new technology including:

- :: A detailed website to explain the Capital Projects Levy as the first phase of its 36-year facilities plan
- :: Purchase of cell phones and rented space for volunteer "phone-athon" evenings to create a database of likely YES voters
- :: Social media including a Facebook page
- :: Community members reviewing/responding to blog posts on the local newspaper's website

CREATE TOOLS TO MEASURE SUCCESS

Community members helped the committee create a new annual Report Card format as a tool for accountability in meeting project scopes, schedules, budgets, and closeout. The Report Card uses red/yellow/green visual indicators to quickly scan for performance feedback by category.

The District formed an independent review committee to provide a quarterly report on the same issues for more detailed analysis of the District's progress. This accountability model has resonated exceptionally well with CKSD's business community members given current economic conditions.

In another visible demonstration of accountability to voters, within 12 hours of winning at the polls, volunteers placed "Thank You" stickers over campaign signs to express gratitude for the community's support.

As the first phase of a 36-year plan, the District is already planning towards its 2016 measure. District leaders will maintain accountability with voters over the next five years of levy implementation, as they know that success or failure of future requests may well be determined by how effectively current projects are completed.

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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