

BLUE RIBBON PLANNING SETS THE STAGE FOR SUCCESSFUL REFERENDUM

MSD of Pike Township
Nathaniel Jones, Superintendent

Additional meetings will be required of the school Superintendent and his/her staff during the referendum campaign. However, networking with the community should be a regular part of the Superintendent's activities and should be well established prior to the announcement of a referendum. Also, a proposed project will be met with an even greater acceptance when strategic planning has been on-going for several years and the community has been made aware of facility needs.

In the MSD of Pike Township, a Blue Ribbon Committee, consisting of 15 members who represented a cross-section of the community, developed a ten-year comprehensive plan for the district's new construction, maintenance and renovations. Each year the Blue Ribbon report was reviewed and an update on the ten-year facility plan, which was initially developed in 2003, was given to the Board and the community. Several of the construction activities now occurring have been included in the facility plan for many years. Strategies utilized in Pike's recent construction referendum are listed below:

1. Members on the Political Action Committee (PAC) were from a cross-section of the community. The 35 members were passionate about the new school construction project, as demonstrated by their faithful attendance. Selecting members for the PAC is much easier if the Superintendent has been highly visible and has an established network within the community.
2. The membership on the PAC included representation from the business community, churches, community leaders and individuals who had excellent contacts with the media, which was invaluable. Some of the members represented organizations with expertise in campaigning, including targeting voters, drafting phone scripts for volunteers and paid phone banks, recording radio spots, coordinating yard sign placement and helping with Election Day coordination.

3. Meetings were conducted in churches and local government facilities. The Superintendent typically began and ended each presentation. Handouts including agendas and other pertinent information about the referendum were provided.
4. PTO members and every school administrator were included in the networking relating to the project.
5. The Superintendent met with legislators and other governmental representatives to discuss the proposed project. A Congressman and his family even appeared on a flyer promoting the referendum project.
6. The Superintendent met and discussed the referendum with several ministers of large churches within the community. Information about the referendum was included in their Sunday bulletins.
7. The primary focus was always on the needs of the students.
8. The Board members played an effective role in helping the community separate facts and truths from false information and inaccuracies shared by the opposition.
9. The Superintendent should seek legal opinions to avoid violating state statues and requirements that seem to be equivalent to a “gag” order. For example, following the election there is an appeal timeline; therefore, the referendum cannot be discussed openly until the appeal timeline has expired.
10. As with every school corporation, there are key staff members, such as a principal, who will have a strong commitment and exceptional organizational skills to help provide additional leadership. Take advantage of this leadership. Pike was fortunate to have key staff members, who after hours provided additional support for important activities. Examples of these activities included organizing phone banks and recruiting volunteers for a variety of activities.
11. On Election Day all polling places were managed by volunteers at all times. Eight to ten volunteers were assigned, on a rotating basis, to be present at the polls.

12. Within weeks, approximately \$28,000 was raised by the PAC, mostly from vendors. The business leaders on the PAC also assisted in raising funds from other local businesses.
13. A variety of media were distributed in the community, i.e., bookmarks, flyers, posters at businesses, etc.
14. Yard signs were placed at areas with high traffic volume beginning about two weeks prior to the voting process.
15. Volunteers went to local retail stores and distributed literature supporting the project.
16. A former student who attended a local college took care of the blogs. There were others who monitored the web, etc., for rumor control purposes.
17. Establish a link on the school website. The website should be well done and should include only the factual data about the project. This will be very valuable should any opposition distort the data to block the project. It is highly recommended that a school attorney approve all literature about the project before sharing it with the public.
18. Large posters that included pictures were placed in each school to demonstrate the nature of the proposed project. Most of the posters were building specific.
19. The referendum should definitely be a citizen-led effort. The approach is not unlike a political campaign. The focus should be on community outreach and building local support.
20. Direct mail was sent to registered voters in the community.

The job description of a Superintendent is always evolving, and even more so with the referendum requirements. The job of a Superintendent is becoming far more political and with increased accountability. During the referendum process, the Superintendent should expect to conduct several meetings relating to the proposed project each week. Once it has been determined that there is

opposition against the project (petition process), the school district must follow the state guidelines and only present to the public factual information about the project. New Superintendents will likely be surprised to learn that tremendous time must be invested in networking with many different segments of the community if they plan to be successful with or without a referendum. Networking and/or planning strategies could likely occupy one-fourth to one-third of a typical work day, to include the actual day to vote. However, as we all know, at the end of the day, it is about doing what is right for our “kids.”