

More Focus Second Time Around

Noblesville Schools Dr. Libbie Conner, Superintendent

"Referenda 2010: Keeping our Schools Strong" was initiated for the purpose of addressing the Noblesville School District's facility and operating needs. There was a significant need for the project and much interest in not having this second referendum fail. The administration and school board turned to the community for the support necessary to expand facilities in order to accommodate growing enrollment and to continue to operate the schools. It was felt that both were essential to keep the schools strong.

Fortunately, prior to this recent effort, the school board and administration had been involved in strategic planning for several years and had very specific goals relating to the need for additional facilities. The community had previously responded to a paper survey about school facility considerations. Although the community had been informed of the needs, it appeared the first referendum failed because the community engagement activities were limited and it was difficult to build community consensus and support. There had been an assumption that everyone supported the schools and most voters would support the first referendum. It quickly became apparent, though, that school board members and school leaders must make the community an active partner in determining priorities and identifying the steps to take in order to meet the needs of its children.

It may be a surprise to many superintendents, but approximately 80% of the superintendent's time during a referendum will likely focus on referendum activities. Fourteen- to 15-hour work days should be expected if an effort is made to get to as many community groups as possible. A significant part of the superintendent's work day should focus on networking with the community.

Superintendents will be pleased to learn that there are several architectural firms and a few construction management firms that have the expertise on staff, such as a community engagement specialist, to help guide them through the facility planning process, the community engagement process, and the campaign. When interviewing architects, it is very important to make sure someone on their staff has both the expertise and experience that you will need. This selection is critical to the success of your referendum; another option is that the school district hire additional consultants to guide the board and administration.

Securing support for Noblesville's referendum involved the superintendent and, when appropriate, the board president making presentations to as many community groups as possible. Even though the district held 18 focus groups, countless presentations to other groups in the community took place. All invitations to speak were accepted. Of the 18 focus groups, the last six focused on the operating referendum.

Below are strategies used and related information leading up to the successful facility and operating referenda.

1. During the 2009-2010 school year, information about the challenges and needs of the school district was shared at many public meetings. The board and superintendent listened to questions, comments, and suggestions regarding the proposed solutions. As a result, the construction plans were adjusted accordingly, and costs were reduced by more than \$10 million.

2. On January 19, 2010, the school board held a preliminary determination hearing to add classrooms at existing elementary schools, to add space to the intermediate school and the high school, and to replace one elementary school at a total cost of \$63.6 million.

3. The school board also addressed the impact of significant state-imposed funding reductions by making plans for reductions in excess of \$2.1 million in operational costs, with additional cuts of \$3.4 million under consideration. The board also took action at the January 19 meeting to pass a resolution to request taxpayer approval of a \$5 million per year operating fund increase for the next seven years through the referendum process. Both referenda were questions for the taxpayers on the May 4th election ballot. Both referenda were supported by the community.

4. Regarding networking, the superintendent is on the Noblesville Chamber of Commerce board and is part of a local leadership group. There is also an active Community Advisory Council. All invitations to make presentations about the schools or about the referenda were accepted, prior to and following the referenda.

5. All of the focus groups were videotaped. One was placed on the school district's website. Individuals who had questions at the focus groups were encouraged to place their questions on 3X5 cards. All questions were answered, plus the 3X5 cards were kept so that commonly asked questions were eventually placed in a publication and sent to the community. One example is titled "Planning for Our Students and Schools;" it is included on the FAIRindiana.org website.

6. In most communities it would be advisable to have school board members serve on referendum-related committees, but not in leadership roles. In Noblesville, however, the board president and superintendent were the presenters at all of the community forums. Also, the board assumed a strong leadership role, with one board member chairing the task force. Board members are well respected in the community; it was felt that they, as elected officials, had an obligation to promote the project, particularly since the superintendent cannot promote a facility referendum following the 1028 and preliminary determination hearing. One previous referendum had failed. There was no intent to fail a second time, because successful passage of the referenda was too important to the district's children to risk losing again.

7. The process, the second time around, began on July 1 and ended on May 4. Almost 12,000 citizens voted. The approval rate was 61 percent.

8. The school district's website provided details about the referenda and as much factual background information as possible. It was critical that the website's information was comprehensive and that the community was fully informed of its availability. The political action committee also had its own website: Educate Noblesville. For legal reasons, no reference to this site was made on the school district's website, since the information promoted the project.

9. A professional pollster was hired at a cost of about \$12,000. Four hundred registered voters were surveyed by phone, with each survey lasting approximately 15 minutes. The survey questions relating to the facility and operating referenda generated useful data which were then submitted to the superintendent. The results accurately indicated how the community felt about the two referenda, for the findings were almost identical to the actual voting results.

10. There were four coordinators on the task force (term for Noblesville's campaign steering committee). Subcommittees included the marketing committee, the PAC and the communication committee. About 200 participated on these committees. Fortunately, a local marketing professional provided leadership to the marketing committee at no cost to the school corporation. All of those in leadership positions were passionate about the project and had exceptional skills.

11. The school district's public relations staff handled all social media, i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.

12. Campaign activities were extensive and included phone trees, analyzing previous voting trends, teachers sending post cards, yard signs, car signs, t-shirts, door-to-door activities, local radio, poll watchers, encouraging YES voters to pre-vote, absentee ballots and lots of publications.

13. Approximately \$20,000 was raised via private donations and by contacting vendors. The teachers' association was very supportive and also contributed to the campaign.

14. One referendum question submitted for public vote was, "For the seven calendar years immediately following the holding of the referendum, shall the school corporation impose a property tax rate that does not exceed sixteen cents (\$0.16) on each one hundred dollars (\$100) of assessed valuation and that is in addition to the school corporation's normal tuition support tax rate?" A second referendum question changed the sixteen cents to twenty-one cents for each one hundred dollars of assessed valuation. A third question was, "Shall Noblesville Schools enter into a lease to finance the Keeping Our Schools Strong Project which includes a new elementary school; the renovation and construction of additions to the current Noblesville Intermediate School, including site improvements; the renovation of the current Noblesville Middle School,

the renovation of Hinkle Creek Elementary and the Former Tri-County Opportunity School, and the renovation of and construction of additions to Noblesville High School, North Elementary School, Hazel Dell Elementary School, White River Elementary School, and Stony Creek Elementary School (the "Project"), which Project is estimated to cost no more than \$63,600,000 and is estimated to increase the property tax rate for debt service by a maximum of \$0.19?"

15. To sum up, it is important that all the information provided to the community be compelling and accurate. It should have a high level of transparency and be clear, concise and consistent. The purpose of the referendum should be to respond to the needs of the community's children. School board members and the superintendent are responsible for keeping the public apprised of the schools' needs and challenges. All stakeholders (taxpayers) deserve to be informed and provided an opportunity to be involved in genuine collaboration and consensus building. After all, the schools belong to the community.