

Lessons Learned from Library Votes

Words from the Wise

This document offers insight gathered from library administrators and advocates experienced with votes in the Mid-Hudson Library System, across New York State, and around the U.S.

ON DOING A PUBLIC VOTE

- **Work continuously to build support for your library.** Since the climate within a community constantly changes, it is dangerous to assume that your library's budget will be approved simply because it has been in the past.

"We had taken our place in the community for granted and we realized that we could no longer do that."
- Margaret Cincotta, Director, North Merrick Public Library, NY

"Get out of your office! Build personal relationships with people. Don't make it seem like the only time they see or hear from you is when you are asking for money." - Barbara Aron, Director, Winnetka-Northfield Public Library District, IL

"Show people how the library fits into their lives, that it's not just a place where academia go." – Patti Harr, Director, Patterson Library, NY

- **Don't be afraid.**

"Don't be afraid of failure, you will learn more from failure than from success. Everything we learned from our failed vote helped us to go back and win the next time." - Kevin Rosswurm, Director, Cuyahoga Falls Library, OH

- **It's not as hard as you think.**

"The chances for success are pretty high. With the absence of some huge fight, you've got a pretty good chance of winning." – Steven Cook, Director, Starr Library, (Rhinebeck) NY

- **Take advantage of the knowledge and experience of other libraries.**

"It was great having Josh Cohen and Martin Miller talk to my board about doing a 414. I also talked with Patti Haar [Director, Patterson Library] endlessly." - Gillian Thorpe, Director, Julia L. Butterfield Library (Cold Spring), NY

"We created a bookmark about our 414 and listed six other libraries in our area that had already done one, because we knew that there was safety in numbers." – Patti Haar, Director, Patterson Library, NY

- **Get buy-in from internal audiences: library staff, board members, Friends, and volunteers.**

"Bring staff into the planning early on. They deal with the public daily and can provide helpful information. In our library, they were particularly helpful with creating the Frequently-Asked-Questions we developed as part of our vote." – Judi Smith, Board President, East Fishkill Community Library, NY



- **Include stakeholders in library planning and campaign efforts.**

"I reached out to several community leaders and asked them to be part of a planning group as part of our strategic planning process. Now I have some of these people calling to check in. Some have asked how the planning process is going; others have asked if there was anything else they can do. These are significant people in the community whom I had no contact with beforehand." - Margaret Cincotta, Director, North Merrick Public Library, NY

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Consider the timing of other votes.**

"We met with government and educational officials to find out when the school and local villages were holding their votes so that the library would not compete with them." – Barbara Aron, Director, Winnetka-Northfield Public Library District, IL

"Avoid confusing people. We had a small building campaign prior to our budget vote and people were saying, "didn't we already have a vote?" Try to educate people to avoid misunderstanding about previous votes." - Kevin Rosswurm, Director, Cuyahoga Falls Library, OH

- **Make your campaign a grassroots effort.**

"Until the public is aware of and impacted by some of the library's hardships, they are not motivated. Consider leaving buckets on the bookshelf collecting water after the rainstorm if you have a leak, don't try to hide it. You need the community to notice and start talking about it." - Denise Medeiros, Director, Dartmouth Public Library, MA

"One primary reason why our special district vote didn't pass was because there wasn't a groundswell of public support. The referendum kind of came from on high: from the Library and the State. There needs to be citizen support. Trustees need to get the buzz started in the community." – Kevin Gallagher, Director, Thrall Library in Middletown, NY

- **Recognize that a public vote is a political process.**

"When it comes to the actual vote strategy, a library director should approach it like a politician, not a librarian. For my first vote, I approached it like a librarian and gave the public tons of information. Then I learned that they get overwhelmed easily and the information gets twisted. It is much better to put out bits of information in sound bites and to have talking points that are repeated continuously." - Denise Medeiros, Director, Dartmouth Public Library, MA

"Libraries that do public votes receive more support than do libraries in wealthy communities." – Jerry Nichols, Director, Palmer Institute for Public Library Organization & Management at Long Island University

- **View the vote as an educational process.**

"You have to educate public about the library's needs and let them know that their support is critical." - Kevin Rosswurm, Director, Cuyahoga Falls Library, OH



- **Recognize that people often don't trust the government.**

"They often think that institutions have money hidden away and that they are mismanaging money. For this reason, you have to promote the openness and transparency of the library." - Margaret Cincotta, Director, North Merrick Public Library, NY

- **Have some money to work with.**

"We collected money from each trustee toward campaign materials and this seemed to work well." – Sue Hartshorn, Trustee, Starr Library, (Rhinebeck) NY

- **Become privy to local dynamics.**

"Learn how things work in your community and then purposefully build contacts of influence. You can begin by first harvesting the internal connections the library has via the director, staff, board, Friends, and volunteers." - Kevin Rosswurm, Director, Cuyahoga Falls Library, OH

- **Make sure you have a committed group of volunteers to promote the vote within the community.**

"The Friends can do things for the library's campaign that the library cannot do for itself." – Linda Deubert, Director, Heermance Memorial Library, NY

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- **Start early.**

"A library should begin planning at least one year ahead. Preparation for our vote was actually three years in the making. Our library cut some hours, library staff had to pay into to get health insurance and some programs were cut. We started building the case long before the vote."
-Barbara Aron, Director, Winnetka-Northfield Public Library District, IL

- **Reach out to your built-in constituency: your library users.**

"It's all personal relationships– make contact with the people who use the library and then ask for their support when you need it." - Kevin Rosswurm, Director, Cuyahoga Falls Library, OH

- **Create messages and talking points that will form the basis of your campaign.**

"People think in sound bites, you have to have some good ones available." - Judi Smith, Board President, East Fishkill Community Library, NY

- **Utilize a variety of marketing and public relations approaches.**

"We found that all the activities we did seemed to bring results. Libraries should be sure to use a variety of strategies to reach the public because everyone receives information in different ways." – Judi Smith, Trustee, East Fishkill Community Library, NY



- **Have a board with a wide range of skills and experience to draw upon.**

"We had a strong board with a nice mix of talents." – Sue Hartshorn, Trustee, Starr Library, (Rhinebeck) NY

"We had a highly skilled and well-organized board that worked as a team." - Judi Smith, Board President, East Fishkill Community Library, NY

- **Avoid publicly allying yourself with anyone who is likely to be divisive.**

"We had a local official who offered to serve as a spokesperson, but we knew at least 50% of the people did not like him. We thanked him, but did not accept his offer because we would have risked alienating a large portion of the public." - Bob Briell, Director, Warren-Trumbull County Public Library, OH

- **Be prepared and proactive.**

"Think about the opposition and how you will respond. Take every potential negative about the library and turn it into a positive." - Margaret Cincotta, Director, North Merrick Public Library, NY

- **When talking with news reporters, put all numbers in writing.**

"Libraries should have a facts sheet where all numbers and important facts for the library's proposition are in writing. This can help to prevent reporters from printing mistakes." - Gillian Thorpe, Director, Julia L. Butterfield Library (Cold Spring), NY

- **When determining the amount of money to ask for, select a reasonable number and go with it.**

"I always tell libraries to look at how much of a tax increase you are selling and make a decision based on what seems reasonable. Any amount you ask for you have to be able to justify." – Josh Cohen, Executive Director, Mid-Hudson Library System, NY

"Rather than calculate like crazy, a board should ballpark what their library will need and then go for it. Just pick a sound number and go with it." – Gillian Thorpe, Director, Julia L. Butterfield Library (Cold Spring), NY

"We knew how much we needed to cover the mortgage for the next 2 – 2 ½ years and we wanted to be able to put the remaining money toward programming. We also considered our long-range plan that called for new books, small salary increases, and small staffing increases. We decided upon our budget based on this." – Sue Hartshorn, Trustee, Starr Library, (Rhinebeck) NY

- **Get people who don't use the library to see beyond their own needs and behaviors.**

"Remind people who don't use the library, that although they might get all the information they need online and not use the library, their friends and family and most of the community use it. Getting them to think beyond their own needs and attitudes can help them to see that the library is providing a critical service to the rest of the community." - Lynda Wills, Director, Winchester Public Library, MA



- **Make the library a community center.**

“We worked to make the library “the place to be” in the community. As a result, more patrons wanted to come, but they got frustrated by not having enough parking, enough computers etc. People saw the need and they wanted something more. They realized they’d have to pay for having something more.” – Kathy Parker, Director, Glenwood-Lynwood Public Library District, IL

- **Be positive.**

“Be optimistic and remember that there is a lot of good will out there toward libraries.” - Greg Lubelski, Director, Wooster Library, OH

- **Say thank-you.**

“We wrote a thank-you letter to the editor, put one in our newsletter.”- - Barbara Aron, Director, Winnetka-Northfield Public Library District

“We thanked supporters by posting a message on our website, putting signs inside and outside the library and giving patrons some snacks in the library.” - Gillian Thorpe, Director, Julia L. Butterfield Library (Cold Spring), NY

