



LGN's SHARED EXPERIENCE REFERENDUM ADVICE FROM YOUR PEERS

INTRODUCTION

If you are planning and strategizing for a referendum campaign, do your research and make use of existing sources. Peers at other districts and governmental agencies can offer their suggestions and samples of campaign material. While every referendum campaign contains unique issues and challenges, there is a collective wealth of information that can be easily obtained and does not need to be newly created. The following is a list of comments and advice compiled by LocalGovNews.org. Thank you to all the members that took the time to contribute to this list!

COMMENTS AND ADVICE

- Public officials and employees advancing any type of referendum should be aware of Section 9-25.1 of the [Disclosure of Campaign Contributions and Expenditures Act](#) (10 ILCS 5/9-25.1). This section of the Election Code, which pertains to election interference, prohibits the use of public funds to advocate voting for or against any candidate or proposition, but allows use of such funds to "disseminate" factual information. Persons violating the Act are subject to criminal penalties.
- A unified board is not just important, it is an absolute must. Try very hard to reach some kind of consensus. If you can't, then you're going to have a tough battle, because the public feels that the board members have been privy to the best information that's out there. If you can't bring the board together, then it's very hard to sell it to the public.
- A referendum reflects a 'values' vote. A person's values are not going to change during a two-month campaign. A referendum has a much better chance of passing if your system already has a strong public relations program in place that helps the community feel ownership of your organization. Citizens are suspicious of election-time-only public relations efforts.
- Plans are intellectual. Votes are emotional. It is your job to make people feel good enough to vote "yes". Know what your residents value.

- You don't need to convert the "no" votes. You only need to get the "yes" votes to actually come out and vote. Identify the "yes" votes and make sure they are registered to vote.
- Generate ideas for voting incentives, develop timetables for using telephone trees, and develop strategies to get all parents, family members, and eligible employees registered to vote. Develop strategies to reach absentee voters.
- If the community's been having some problems, you should start a year and a half in advance with some straight PR coming out of your organization. Not pro-referendum or anti-referendum, nothing to do with the referendum. Get newsletters going. Invite people to the board meetings. Get your organization in focus all the time in the newspaper.
- Focus on "educating the public" by boosting knowledge about your organization—both internally and externally. Some of your employees may be the worst detractors. They may need as much as outside individuals.
- Internally, make sure elected and appointed officials, volunteers, administrators, and staff understands the need for the referendum. Often voters go to your employees to ask for their opinions if they are undecided on how to vote.
- Conduct a "communications audit". A communications audit involves target audiences and focus groups of parents, business professionals, community leaders, employees, elected officials, news reporters, retirees, and others and is extremely revealing.
- Conduct a "strategic listening effort". Hold public input session where you just listen to your constituents. Let the constituents give you the options. Let them know that they are heard.
- Work to keep morale high and help employees remain focused on your organization's mission. Your employees may feel overwhelmed or feel as if they are "living-under-the-microscope". Use humor to get through the tough times.
- Work with labor union leaders to organize support and settle collective-bargaining agreements early.
- Your plan should be very evident. You have to have an obvious need, and when you put out (informational campaign) material, that need has to just pop off the paper.
- Create a well-coordinated message
- Have a short, concise and repeated consistent substantive message that is always presented. Limit the number of people that present the message.

- Your message to the people should be in the form of a story. Tell your story.
- You should develop a slogan. Your slogan should capture an emotional response to your plan.
- No matter how big or small a role they play, volunteers should be able to answer common questions. What are your organization's needs? How exactly is the money going to be spent? What will happen if the referendum fails?
- Keep the message of the campaign simple, and make sure that everyone working with the campaign is staying "on message." Create a list of "talking points" so that campaign committee members could refer to them often.
- Effective campaign messages are clear and concise and developed from survey research. The campaign uses voters' information sources to target specific key messages to specific "yes" voters. No threatening messages should be used.
- Keep materials child-centered. Voters are more apt to react positively to a referendum when materials have been designed around the benefits the referendum can bring their children and grandchildren than they are to promotional efforts dealing strictly with the square footage of new facilities site requirements or cold statistical information.
- Coordinate widespread use of public and private business marquees during the campaign, each bearing the same uniform message of support.
- In campaign fliers, advertising, etc. only show the "YES" check box option. "No" isn't even an option that should be displayed.
- Your referendum should be about image and what your voters value.
- Organize site-based administrators, employees, and residents by neighborhood so they can function as a team for that geographic area.
- Involve stakeholders in developing the plan. Use technology to allow every resident to provide input at his or her convenience.
- Enlist the help of many types of supporters, including senior citizens, arts and music proponents, and even local members of the staunch anti-tax parties.
- Gather opinions from a "mirror". A mirror should be someone that is uninvolved in the issue. Ask the mirror to react to your issue from a variety of perspectives, such as if they were a new resident, an old resident, a business owner, a parent, a grandparent, etc. "People will say....." "People will think....." "People will rant....."

- Invite a group of successful, independent local business professionals to evaluate your organization's fiscal management structure and improvements and have them serve as a financial advisory committee to the Board.
- Address how your organization got into its current fiscal situation, why your organization needs additional funding, how the extra funds will be used, where your organization ranks in the state and nationally across categories, what programs are in place and why they are valuable, what would happen if no additional funds are made available, how quality of life is linked to your organization, what the tax hike means financially to each voter, why it is important to support the referendum, and how your organization will be accountable for these new funds.
- Having independent business professionals deliver your message carries much more weight than if having your staff deliver the same message.
- Conduct pre-referendum planning so that you have precise budget figures on the project's costs, which may then be translated into a specific funding method and subsequently the referendum ballot question and tax amount. Not only evaluate your project's construction cost but also consider the facility's operational costs, furnishings, etc. To open and run a facility, all costs need to be factored in. One should take care to ask for the right amount, no more, and certainly no less for a turnkey project.
- Establish a program that allows cost-center account managers to carry forward any year-end balances rather than force them to "use it or lose it." This program is a hedge against the possibility that the referendum will fail.
- Develop mock budgets based on "best guess" funding estimates for both successful and failed tax referenda.
- Voters should be informed--but not threatened--about what is likely to occur if the proposal fails.
- Deal with obsolescence. Voters worry that the pace of change will require the frequent replacement of equipment and place a recurring burden on taxpayers.
- Buildings are a rich part of the town's heritage and the community needs to understand the decisions to replace them with modern facilities.
- Anticipate some community residents will make cost comparisons to other organizations. To determine the validity of the comparisons, you must recognize the similarities and differences between your organization's plan and your neighbor's.

- You should take care to weigh each of your options so when the opposition states "we think a new building is a better solution," you can be ready with a response such as "we considered that option carefully and in our evaluation found that option to be less desirable for whatever reason."
- Take a history lesson. To understand how potential bond measures may fare, it is important to know how recent fiscal measures--both bonds and tax increases--have done at the ballot box. Obtaining election results of statewide bond measures can show how each community voted.
- Hire a local professional communications company before and during the referendum campaign to provide polling analyses and statistical validation of voter sentiment over time.
- Have an outside consultant interview the administration, community members, and the board members separately. Have them put all the information together and tell you whether they think the referendum will pass and why it will or why it won't.
- Outsiders should run your focus groups so the people who are running them are neutral. Very often, the side issues that exist in the communities will surface.
- When working with focus groups, try to be as specific as possible with the questions you want answered. In order for the public to make an informed decision, they have to have the kind of information you're going to present in the referendum.
- Try to make the timing good for your community. Try to be the only one on the ballot. Timing may be a problem if other taxing bodies or neighboring districts have recently suffered failed referendums. If you have recently lost a campaign yourself, you should take sufficient time to study what happened and find out what needs to change before you try again.
- The community always likes to see attempts to join forces with other governmental agencies to enhance services and spread the cost. As you are working toward healing or strengthening relationships with your village or city, school and library districts, remember, they just may be wanting to assist in your venture, or willing to swap property or sell a no longer needed facility at a bargain price. With a healthy working relationship, you can brainstorm win-win outcomes for both entities and everyone benefits.
- Request official resolutions from other taxing bodies supporting the referendum.
- Enlist support from local minority religious leaders and making presentations at the community's minority churches.

- Ask local newspaper/magazine editors to write positive articles about your organization based on their professional or personal experiences. Establish a widespread “letter to the editor” writing campaign to demonstrate visible support in local news papers.
- Identify opponents and side issues. It’s not a tax increase most of the time that defeats bond referendums. It is a side issue. For example, it might be an employee dismissal. Once you have identified your “hot areas,” you are in a better position to plan how you will neutralize these forces and you are less likely to be taken by surprise.
- Select the chair and members of the steering committee carefully. Choose people who are respected and have credibility in the community. Give consideration and representation to all demographic groups.
- Believers make great volunteers
- Create a time line for your campaign. Include everything you or your volunteers need to do – no matter how large or how small the task – and who is going to do it.
- The structure of your committee of volunteers should be as formal as any business.
- The Problem: Limited financial resources; The Solution: Rely heavily on human capital
- The Problem: Cynicism and apathy surrounding budget deficits, public policy, or politics; The Solution: Translate self-interest into action and galvanize people around an issue
- The Problem: Traditional public relations tactics such as television & radio slots can be too limited; The Solution: Put a human face on the issues and supplements traditional strategies
- Stay away from the negative. Be ready to describe how passage of the issue will positively affect the quality of life and the future of the community.
- Use an architect to sell the campaign. Hire an architectural firm experienced in providing campaign assistance. They can take an active role in your campaign, from explaining your plan at community forums and answering questions to assisting with preparation of campaign literature.
- Use Direct Mail. Direct mail is invaluable in getting the message across. It should be considered a key to the success of any campaign.

- Campaigns fail when: The campaign started too late and too much material went out too fast; The campaign was not based on research; The information presented was too complex and too dollar-oriented; The campaign didn't have vigorous citizen leadership; The wrong information channels were used to reach voters; Campaign activities were not put in priority order or were not completed.
- Say thank you when a referendum is approved! Run a full-page ad in the local newspaper thanking voters for their support. Include a time line for when projects will be completed. Ask key community groups like the Chamber of Commerce or Realtors to include your thank you and time line in their newsletters. And, be sure you send letters of thanks with the time line to your mailing list of key communicators and campaign volunteers.
- Keep the community involved. Once your referendum has passed, continue to find ways to involve members of our community through the implementation process.

COMMENTS AND ADVICE FOR CITIES SEEKING HOME RULE

- The municipality must identify a local issue which concerns the electorate, such as the acquisition of open space, the development of a golf course, or some other identifiable purpose for which home rule authority will be used. If no particular issue is identified, the public seems reluctant to confer home rule powers. However, if a municipality can demonstrate that they may be able to provide residents with something for free that they may not otherwise be able to provide without home rule authority, residents will usually support home rule.
- The municipal board must have a proven track record of fiscal responsibility. Residents are more likely to trust their officials not to abuse home rule authority if the officials not previously abused the taxing authority they have possessed in the past. Generally, residents who trust their officials and understand their municipal board's objectives are more likely to trust their officials not to abuse home rule authority.
- Municipal officials must be willing to play an active role in educating their communities about the advantages of home rule and about their municipality's specific agenda for the use of home rule authority. Aggressive educational campaigns on this issue usually pay off.
- Emphasize the benefits of having greater flexibility to control local issues locally. Provide examples of how your city can respond creatively to unique local needs such as quality of life, environmental problems, development regulations, etc.

- Emphasize the increased ability to shift the tax burden onto user fees and non-residents: taxation (sales, motel and property), borrowing (lower interests rates, bonding), creative approaches to financing including fees and licenses to handle several needs including unfunded mandates.