

Project Summary

Salem-Keizer School Construction Bond Campaign
Salem, Oregon

RESEARCH: A task force of citizens and district staff did a two-year in-depth analysis of our school facilities and future enrollment growth. Based on this analysis, more than \$500 million in key repairs, renovations, updates and the need for new schools were identified. We presented this information to our community in early January and February of 2008 and our school board proposed a construction bond as a possible solution. The feedback from the community (Bond Feasibility Survey, community forums, and online survey) said they understood the need, but felt \$500 million was too much. They asked our board to focus on repairs and updates, and scale down the number of new schools. The school board kept all the most urgent repairs and updates on the construction bond proposal and reduced the number of new schools to four (one middle school and three elementary schools) – scaling down the cost of the bond to \$242.1 million. The board moved forward and placed the construction bond on the November 2008 ballot.

Based on this research, several main themes emerged:

Our community wanted to:

- increase school safety;
- renovate and upgrade existing school facilities;
- build 4 new schools to address crowding;
- ensure independent citizen oversight for bond projects and expenditures.

The goal of the campaign was to share how the construction bond addressed these desires while continuing to build strong relationships between our community and district staff. We also had to reinforce the message that our district will be accountable for money spent, decisions will be transparent, and feedback opportunities for the community will be provided.

PLANNING/ANALYSIS: Early surveys and status checks with our community showed that we had a tough mountain to climb to pass a construction bond. The first Bond Feasibility Survey (conducted in May 2007) showed an overall support for a bond at 55% among our voters. Starting into 2008, we were also living in the shadow of a declining economy, and had to compete for attention on the ballot (presidential campaign, other local tax campaigns). In addition, we were mending trust relationships that had suffered in previous years due to a challenging district administration and School Board. In other words, we had to rebuild a few burned bridges and change a strong perception in our community that our district was not transparent and could not be trusted to spend money wisely. This was going to be the toughest part of passing a construction bond.

Step one was analyzing what resources we had in place to communicate, and what we needed to create.

Current resources:

- Current district Web site
- Current district publications (*E-Updates, Inside 24J, Achievement*)
- Key communicator network (each school developed intense networks a year prior to the start of the campaign so the infrastructure and relationships were in place or being built before we started discussions around the construction bond)
- Internal staff: This was our biggest focus of the construction bond campaign

What needed to be created (We had a \$40,000 budget to work with):

- Printed informational materials about the construction bond
- PowerPoint presentations and talking points for district staff
- construction bond Web site

Step two was developing a communications plan that focused on four things.

1. Help district staff be an informed resource about the bond, and empower them to carry the main themes of why a construction bond is needed.
2. Create clear and concise materials that carry the main themes of why a construction bond is needed

3. Provide and seek-out opportunities for staff to have face-to-face interactions with key community members to discuss the main themes of the construction bond while continuing to build relationships and trust with stakeholders.
4. Align the district's informational campaign and efforts of information sharing with the Political Action Committee for the bond.

IMPLEMENTATION/COMMUNICATION: There were two essential phases of the construction bond communications plan. Phase one was April 2008 (Board places the bond on the ballot) through August 2008 (just before school starts); Phase two was September 2008 up until the night of the election in November.

Phase one was the awareness and heightening of interest around the construction bond. This involved creating the essential printed material and online resources; early distribution of a few key printed pieces; presentation to district staff with basic overviews of the construction bond; revving up key communicator relationships with direct letters and contact that included basic information about the construction bond; and gearing up for phase two. All the while, we continued our efforts to increase trust, including a stronger presence of our Superintendent in the community, School Board directors hosting more opportunities to interact with community members, and providing more details and training to district staff around the topic of communication and building relationships.

Phase two started with a bang right as school started in the fall of 2008. All district schools and departments received construction bond material packets and asked to display them in prominent places in their buildings. District leadership (principals, Executive Cabinet, department supervisors) was given a task list of communication items to complete by specific deadlines. These included giving a power-point presentation to staff and key communicator groups, sending a letter to key communicators, placing informational articles in their school newsletters, etc. All their informational materials and directions for use, were provided on a Web page for easy access and download.

On the district level, Superintendent Sandy Husk and Executive Cabinet gave informational presentations at key community groups like Kiwanis, Rotary, Chambers of Commerce, key business groups, etc. More than 30 presentations were conducted. Direct mailings to all residents of Salem and Keizer were sent out twice in early October and right before the election. The construction Bond Web site was continuously updated with current information, and an FAQ section was included to help answer questions circulating in the community. Ads were placed in local newspapers, and information continued to be shared and aligned with the construction bond's Political Action Committee for the bond.

In general, throughout phase one and two, we took every opportunity to empower district staff to share information with their network of friends and family. We provided them with the resources to talk about the construction bond, and asked for their help in sharing the information. We also gave them routes to provide feedback to us about what they were hearing in the community. From that feedback, we could address key issues circulating about the bond. The FAQ Web page helped answer the big questions, and when possible, we provided answers directly to the staff that needed them.

EVALUATION: On November 4, 2008, our community passed a \$242.1 million construction bond (one of the largest in Oregon history). Not only did the bond pass, but it passed by 58%, considered a high vote of approval. After the celebration was over, we reviewed the entire plan and effort done over the seven-month period. Did we accomplish what we set out to do? Yes. The planning and implementation was done with few problems, and we all agreed that if we had to do it again, we would follow the same plan. In addition, the process used during the construction bond informational campaign is now a template for future communication efforts, including our current major issue with budget reductions.