



Oregon School Boards Association

Learn from the Winners: Culver School District

Culver School District

ADM: 654

November 2013 Construction bond: \$8.8 million

50.1% approval

Culver School District's bond election results were a nail biter. On election night, the measure was declared a winner by three votes. That's too close for comfort, and it barely missed an automatic recount, triggered if the margin had been closer by one vote.

Culver is a small community. The school district had some challenges to overcome for this election, their fourth attempt since 2008.

Identifying challenges

"A lot depends on circumstances you can't control," said school board member Zoe Schumacher.

"Timing is huge."

After three previous attempts, volunteers suffered from campaign fatigue. "In the last campaign, we had a dedicated core group of doers. For this campaign, the doers were worn out," she said.

For Culver, the economy was an obstacle in each election. "A lot of folks are in survival mode," she said. The combination of the government shutdown and the arrival of property tax bills in October made people more aware of their taxes and the cost of a new money measure.

There is a larger than average number of people without a connection to schools. Forty-eight percent of the community is 60 and older, and part of the community lives in the wealthier, gated Three Rivers community, where many residents are second home owners.

Understanding voters and helping voters understand their schools

A campaign strategy was to increase community engagement in local schools. "We tried to share what our schools were doing and facing," she said. "We heard people say the buildings look fine, and facilities staff were doing a great job. We needed to get people in the buildings."

Schumacher, involved in all four bond elections, said she felt the same way when she was a new board member. "Going behind the scenes in the buildings was an eye opener." That experience helped her understand the need to show their schools to the community.

The district offered tours upon request to show the reality of the buildings, and they worked hard to understand voters' perspectives and allow input to influence decisions.

“We listened when talking with folks, rather than trying to change their minds by persuasion. Our job is to put out the facts. We listened to their concerns. We listened when we planned the measure and reduced the amount by \$950,000 for this election. “

Early in her board service, she attended an OSBA Bonds, Ballots and Buildings conference, where the gap between community perception and schools was emphasized. “The really big piece I took away was that public perception is important,” she said. “It is something the board needs to be aware of. Rubbing elbows with like-minded people only gives you positive feedback. You don’t hear from others until they have a problem or you are running a bond measure. You have to be aware of the big picture, so you can meet them on their turf. They may not vote, but they’re talking to people who do.”

Strategies for winning

Schumacher said they didn’t have a silver bullet in the last election. They ran a low-key campaign that focused on message consistency, transparency and a project list that was easy to share and defend. The strategy was to be forthright in what the money was for and to stick with it.

“The projects are not part of a wish list,” said Schumacher. “We tried to hammer the message that these projects are critical.” The previous failures and the passage of time made the items that had once been a lower priority became more urgent, and many are now rated critical.

Unlike previous attempts, they didn’t start with a random-sample survey. “It was too costly, and we discovered that what voters were saying in the survey was not what we got in the voting results,” said Schumacher. Instead, the goal was to engage the community as much as possible in community meetings and informal interactions. “We asked, why didn’t you support this and what would you support?”

They showed their community a solid plan. “We identified the needs and evaluated the buildings. We did an energy audit. It wasn’t just someone saying, ‘I think.’ We knew what the needs were,” said Schumacher.

There were some positives, too. The district ended up with a good long-range facilities plan for future bond attempts, and the community has a better understanding of their schools, which resulted in more support. “With each time we went out, we gained ground,” said Shumaker. “Each time we gained yes votes.”