

POSITIVE RETURNS



By Nancy Shepherdson

A little planning and some good public relations can help your department win big in a bond referendum.

On election night in April, Deputy Fire Chief Jeff Steingart knew his Countryside (Ill.) Fire Protection District was going to pull off a huge victory. He just had no idea how big. By the time all the votes in favor of the district's construction bond referendum were counted, the district had tallied an incredible 73% of the vote.

"The vote demonstrated the commitment of our population to this fire district," says Chief Jim Spiegel. The most significant outcome of the landslide vote, though, was its effect on Countryside's bond rating. According to Spiegel, it now has the best rating of any fire protection district in Illinois and is tied for the top with five districts nationwide.

But victory did not come without effort. Nearly all of the 65 firefighters and officers at Countryside's two fire stations worked for weeks to ensure that the public understood what was at stake. On election night, a roomful of tired firefighters and supporters celebrated victory with champagne and cigars in the old station in Mundelein. It could now be demolished and a new one built, and not a moment too soon.

Ballot question

The old station, part of which dates from 1955, features "a rat's nest of wires, holes in the ceiling that soaked our gear when it rained, with rust and peeling paint all over," according to Lt. Tim Rick. Prior to the election, a blue tarp covered a big leak in the roof. And the station's fire trucks needed custom-made retractable deluge guns to fit in the bay doors. Modern state-of-the-art trucks have been out of the question here. Still, Countryside had been unwilling to ask voters to pay more in taxes in an already heavily taxed area. Then in 1998 the Commission on Fire

Accreditation International said in that year's risk assessment that the district's two fire stations were undersized and had to be replaced. The Vernon Hills station was replaced first using funds already on hand. Not enough money was left for Mundelein, though, forcing the ballot question. But if he had to ask for a tax increase, Spiegel was determined to be on the winning side.

Other fire protection districts that find themselves without adequate funds can learn a lot from Countryside's winning campaign.

Build a relationship with the community

Before the election was even contemplated, firefighters had been participating for years in community events, including bringing fire trucks to block parties and to schools. A newsletter regularly goes to each home in the district. One of the programs it advocates is an Internet fire safety program for families. In addition, Countryside has its own cable-access TV show. Firefighters are trained by the deputy chief to provide good customer service — fast, caring and with a smile, when appropriate. "It was our history with the community that allowed us to build a positive campaign," says Spiegel.

Pick a "good" election

If you can, schedule your ballot question for a time when fewer voters come to the polls. This will reduce the amount of money and effort you must expend to reach them. The best elections for tax questions are "off year" or special elections — that is, those times when no major offices such as governor or president are on the ballot. Countryside chose an election in which only local offices such as school boards and municipal and township trustees were up

for election. People who show up for these elections are among the most informed and committed of all voters. Many of them will study your issue carefully and be receptive to your message. Even better for fire districts, many of those voters are older people who live in rental or assisted-living units. They benefit from the increased level of service you will provide with the additional funds requested without being burdened by a tax increase in most cases.

Look for experience

If you lead a district of any size, it's very likely that some of your officers, firefighters or paramedics have worked on political campaigns before. That information is not likely to end up in a personnel file, so don't look for it there. Spiegel put out a call for volunteers about six months before the election, after carefully explaining to everyone what was at stake in the election. As a result, two Countryside firefighter/paramedics, Scott Webb and Bill Wolff, stepped forward and took charge of the campaign. If no one has the experience or desire to help, ask local politicians for referrals. Many of them know experienced campaign workers who will donate time and expertise to a good cause.

Create a powerful message

About 10 weeks before the election, Countryside held a series of four Saturday community meetings, similar to focus groups, to find out what residents thought about the district. "The biggest misconception," recalls Wolff, "was that people thought we were building a whole new station instead of rebuilding this one."

Based on those meetings, Webb created a series of postcards and a yard sign with a simple message: "Support Countryside

Fire.” He also created a handout for firefighters to pass out during the campaign. All the messages explained that “approving the construction bond will enable the Countryside Fire District to borrow the funds needed to replace the failing and outdated fire station on Midlothian Road.” More detailed information was available on the district’s Web site. All the messages were informative without straying into electioneering. Webb also used the basic message to help supporters write letters to the editor. Get the message out to the right people

Countryside used Votebusters to target the people most likely to vote in this election. The company produced “walk lists” showing only people who had voted in similar elections in the past. (It makes little sense to contact anyone else — people who haven’t voted in similar elections before are unlikely to start.) Countryside firefighters used these lists of likely voters, which were organized by precinct, to ring the doorbells of likely voters and discuss the issue with them during the five Saturdays before the election. Each firefighter was given a brief script to memorize or ad lib which talked about the old fire station and the dire need for a new one. It was particularly important to get this message out in the Vernon Hills area of the district, which already had a new fire station.

“The voter lists really helped. We spent our energies on people who would actually vote,” says Rick, who walked door to door every day that he wasn’t on duty in a neighborhood where he used to live. Wolff was in charge of the roster for walkers, who usually numbered about 20 each Saturday. Those volunteers knocked on doors about three hours each Saturday and left literature when voters weren’t at home. Wolff estimates that at least a quarter of the voters who regularly vote in this type of election talked to a firefighter personally. Wolff also gave talks at senior citizens’ centers in the district.

The voter data used to construct these walk lists are available to any political group, although you may have to officially register with your county. If you manipulate the data yourself, be sure to ask for data about voters in your fire district only and request precinct number, name, address, phone, age and vote history for the type of election your ballot question will appear in. You can manipulate the data in a spreadsheet. Walk sheets

should be sorted by precinct so that neighboring streets are on the same walk list.

Get two “yeses”

The door-to-door script concluded with an important question: “Can we count on your yes vote on April 5?” During briefings before their walks, firefighters were instructed to ask this question of every voter who answered the door and record the answer. Those answers would become important on election day. The “yes” voters were also asked if they would display the “We Support Countryside Fire” sign in their yards.

“Our idea was to get people to take ownership of the idea: ‘Gee, if Bob and Jean are going to support Countryside, maybe I will, too,’” explains Spiegel. Once people agreed to have signs in their yards, another team, which included the chief and deputy chief, usually delivered them. Spiegel reports mostly positive responses to these personal contact efforts: “It was a real rush to get a yes.” Steingart was often asked for signs as he traveled around the district, and was often stopped by people in the grocery store asking for them. The district had to reorder signs and managed to place 500, almost all in the yards of supporters.

Get out the vote

Election day is when those yeses become important. You’ll want to assign a poll watcher to every polling place where you expect a significant number of voters. Permits for that are available from election officials about 30 days before the election. Countryside had about 15 volunteer poll watchers who showed up when the polls opened. Their job was to check off their “yes” voters as they arrived to vote.

At a pre-arranged time, poll watchers contact their “get out the vote” coordinator to convey the names of “yes” voters who have not yet come to the polls. The coordinator then activates another group of volunteers to make calls to these voters to get them to the polls. Many times rides are also offered, especially to senior citizens. “Getting out the vote was the most important factor, making sure we identified our ‘yes’ voters and got them to the polls,” says Webb.

Have a calendar

Winning an election may seem like a lot of work to do in very little time. You can make

it easier on yourself by planning ahead. Working back from election day, decide what you need to do and by when. Going door to door, for instance, starts about five weeks before the election, but how long will it take you to recruit and brief volunteers to do that? Yard signs can take up to four weeks to print after you’ve selected a supplier. And you’ll need to create your message and start fund raising even before that. And, of course, you need to meet the deadline to file your ballot question.

Funding the win

All of this literature, signs and data, of course, costs money. But it doesn’t cost as much as you may think. Countryside spent exactly \$5,000 to win its election. Almost all of that money came from friends and family of the firefighters and officers themselves, as well as from people concerned about the dilapidated state of the building. That prominent blue tarp at the Mundelein station garnered at least one donation. A little girl in his daughter’s class pressed a \$3 donation on Spiegel “so you can fix your roof!”

Ask every firefighter to raise or contribute \$100 or so and you’ll probably have more than enough. Also assign someone to be in charge of the funds as Wolff was for Countryside. Receipts and expenditures must be carefully recorded. You may also have to set up a political committee and report to your local election board. Check your local laws.

Countryside started its campaign in November 2004 for an April 5 election, but the outcome made it all worthwhile. The day after the election, Countryside erected two huge “Thank You” signs outside the Mundelein fire station. Then they took down the blue tarp. “It was just like fighting a great fire,” Spiegel says. “You feel so good when you get the job done.”

About the Author

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