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How to involve a community in library funding: Turning dreams into reality

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The Corvallis-Benton County Public Library has achieved an inordinate number of goals in the past seven years. In fact, we think of ourselves as a library that has survived and thrived in spite of seemingly overwhelming odds.

Although it's been a struggle, we've increased our book budget 600%. In June we passed the 1.3 million annual circulation mark, and more than 2,000 people visit the library each day, seven days a week. We just dedicated a 5,000-square-foot

library, which was built entirely with volunteer labor and donations, in one of our rural communities. And it wasn't long ago, February 1992, that we dedicated the 57,000 square foot central library, which was completed on time and under budget.

Six years ago the voters of Corvallis passed a \$6.85 million bond measure for the building with 70% yes votes. Two years ago, voters

approved creation of a permanent library district with secure and excellent funding with 60% yes votes. Two important reasons for our success are that we had good projects and that we successfully sold the need. The most important reason for our victories, however, is that these projects belonged to the community, not to the staff, library board, or city council. The community was

intimately involved not only in campaigning for the new facility and the library district, but in planning and designing their new library as well.

With the dedication of the central library building, we achieved a community dream. On dedication day more than 10,000 people visited their new library. A key phrase rang as true dedication day as today: A community is judged by its library!

Together citizens, staff, board members, and policy makers built our library from a well-loved but tattered service to a top-notch community asset. Never before has our community dreamed so powerfully that their dream sparked first a vision, then an action plan, and then—with lots of hard work—steel, bricks, and books.

The main library building was constructed in two major phases. The first building was designed by now noted architect Pietro Belluschi. It covered 5,100 square feet and was dedicated in 1932. A desperately needed addition was completed in 1965 and added 17,000 square feet. This addition was intended to last 15 years.

By 1987 not only were we seven years overdue for a new building, but we had unfortunately been combined with the Parks and Recreation Department. The board, Friends of the Library, and staff began actively selling the need for a new building to the budget commission and city council.

We were given a partial go-ahead. First, we were told to create a master plan of service, facility, and funding needs. The master plan report, submitted in September 1988, outlined the dismal state of affairs of the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library. Essentially, we were told to rethink the way we provided all services to the public.

Reprioritize, we were told. Look at all staffing, budget, planning, and board activities. The book collection was professionally assessed as mediocre at best, a threat to the community welfare at worst. The building was rotting. It was also one of the only unautomated libraries of its size. And finally, continued increases in the budget combined with stagnation in use of all library services for more than a decade resulted in a situation whereby the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library was steadily increasing the cost of doing business.

At this point, in 1988, the city council and board had tough decisions to make. The city council directed staff to move forward. The library was recreated as a separate department. The staff took the master plan advice seriously. It gave us a focus. It provided us with a "magnetic direction."

In *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt said, "Strategic planning is worthless unless there is first a strategic vision. A strategic vision is a clear image of what you want to achieve, which then organizes and instructs every step toward that goal. The extraordinary successful strategic vision for NASA was

How to Involve a Community in Library Funding:

Turning Dreams Into Reality

by Deborah L. Jacobs

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An open and persistent informational campaign enabled the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library to garner a 70% yes vote and pass a \$6.85 million bond measure.

'Put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.' That strategic vision gave magnetic direction to the entire organization. Nobody needed to be told or reminded of where the organization was going."

Vision is the heart and soul of every strategic plan. Our "strategic vision" gave magnetic direction not only to our entire organization, but also to our community.

We improved everything rapidly. We doubled the book budget and doubled the staff dedicated to reference without adding a single dollar or FTE. We opened Sundays and made minor service-oriented floor plan changes. We also forged new, supportive relationships with the Friends and Foundation.

The master plan consultant told us to not consider going to the voters for a new facility for five years. It would take that long, he believed, to get ourselves in shape. But, he didn't know about our staff and board's tenacity!

Immediately all statistics and performance measures showed that use had begun to rise. Seemingly overnight, public opinion began shifting. Most remarkable of all, the council gave the staff direction to move forward with developing plans for expanding our main library facility.

Now that we'd made some immediate service enhancements (hours, book budget, and staffing) there were three major components to our work plan:

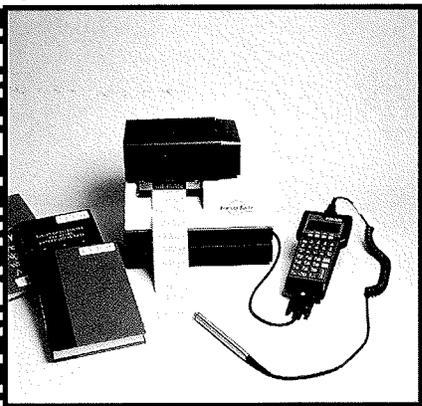
1. Marketing library services
2. Initiating a library campaign
3. Initiating facility planning

Marketing Library Services

The Library and its services had been disintegrating for so long that we needed to get the word out that "things were looking different." Not only did staff become active on the service club circuit, but we also worked closely with the newspaper and the radio stations. They were wonderful in helping us tell our story and in giving us good, regular coverage.

We wanted people to be familiar with the library and its services before we began campaigning. As noted, the master plan said we needed five years of hard work before the voters could respect us enough to give us more money. We only had one year and thus, our "strategic vision" was clear.

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Dreams

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Initiating a Library Campaign:

The first thing we learned was that the best time to go to the voters on a library issue, if you have a choice, is November in odd-numbered years. Based on that, we set a date: November 7, 1989. Our mayor worked with the school district and county to ensure that we'd be the only major entity on the ballot.

In January 1989 we held a joint retreat with the library board, the Friends, the foundation, and the League of Women Voters. We also invited citizens who had been instrumental in getting other capital projects approved locally. At this meeting we brainstormed important components of the campaign and determined a theme and time frame.

Initiating Facility Planning

All of this activity ran parallel to learning everything about building a library. One of the first things we learned was that we needed a qualified library building consultant. We were lucky to find an extremely qualified library building consultant and an architectural firm with many successful library projects.

We knew we needed to get people involved in initial building design. Thus, we held a series of well-attended community meetings to find out whether the citizens were willing to support an expanded library facility and what they wanted to see in that library. Getting people involved paid off. They quickly began to feel ownership in the library and its design. When we took the model and blueprints around during the campaign, we would often hear people say, "Oh look at that, they listened to me and added stairs, a back door, a patio, etc."

Working closely with our architects, we were able to accomplish all of the community's desires. When we went to the voters, we could honestly say, "This is the building you wanted."

The Campaign

To help lead the election campaign, the mayor appointed four co-chairs. He selected carefully. They included the retired and highly respected former president of Oregon State University, an elderly businessman who not only is "the richest man in town" and quite respected but also was the contractor of the earlier library addition, a young successful downtown businessman, and the president of the League of Women Voters. Most fortuitously, the mayor appointed his wife as campaign coordinator. We always knew that if a crisis hit, the mayor would know before his head hit the pillow.

The Committee for the Library was formed with an initial working committee of about 20 busy-but-

committed people. They believed it was important to have a low-key campaign. Their strategy was to only get out the obvious yes votes and not bother with anyone else.

In spite of plans for a low key campaign, it was a loud, excited, and highly visible campaign. As the campaign progressed, we realized the importance of doing everything possible to reach everyone.

The key to our success was our integrity.

Every detail of our bond measure had been scrutinized prior to going to the voters. We were proud of every detail and felt convinced that if the citizens knew, they too would be proud. An important aspect of our campaign was that everyone knew about what was happening. Thus, even if people voted "no," they were informed "no" voters.

By election day we were exhausted. In total 900 people volunteered on the campaign. The results came in early, and we won by 70%, carrying every precinct. Not only was this election the largest tax measure ever offered to the voters, but we won by the largest margin.

At the groundbreaking ceremony eleven months after the election, the mayor said, "When a good community comes together, good things happen."

This has become our motto.

We learned a tremendous amount from this project about our community and about the library. This has carried us forward through many other tasks and challenges.

Love and passion built memories and community spirit, as well as a new library building. This exquisite and functional structure now stands as a monument to the people of Corvallis and their own dedication.

Leadership is, I believe, about enlisting people in a cause. I can't think of anything we haven't done to get community support in the past seven years.

We all need to look constantly for opportunities to involve our communities in our library's success. Maya Angelou says, "Librarians are magnificent miracles." I believe it is really the libraries that are the magnificent miracles, and I believe—if you give people a chance—they'll do anything to be part of making the miracle happen. 