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The Gift to the Citizens of Coos Bay

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Thanks to a gift from the citizens of the city of Coos Bay, 1998 promises to be a busy and exciting year for the Coos Bay Public Library. The "gift" was resounding approval at the polls in the November 3, 1997, election for expansion of the library building. With a 2-to-1 margin — a 67 - 33 percent — and a voter turnout of 58.8 percent, city residents endorsed a proposal to spend \$1.5 million in urban renewal funds for a 10,000-square foot addition to the existing 16,000-square-foot library building.

When the city's proposal surfaced, there was already wide recognition in the community of the library's need to expand and general understanding of many of the issues involved. This prior knowledge stemmed from community involvement in a long planning process culminating last year in efforts to use urban renewal dollars for a much larger building expansion. These efforts came to a halt because of the threat to

urban renewal from passage of Measure 47. Some people had opposed the large project; many had supported it. Almost everyone was aware of it. It was against this backdrop of community awareness that the November ballot measure was filed. The immediate mobilization of a strong group of committed library supporters to campaign for the measure and the consistent effort by city officials to disseminate information about the proposal assured a positive outcome.

Some of the factors involved may be unique to Coos Bay. First of all, the measure was advisory only, and the city Urban Renewal agency was not bound by

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the outcome. When Agency officials saw that urban renewal money would be available under Measure 50 after all, they decided to ask voters their opinion on spending some of it for the library, even though a vote was not required. When Mayor Joanne Verger introduced the idea, library supporters received their first challenge. Filing date for the November election was near, and it was a mail-in election. There were only a few weeks to prepare the voters for the measure.

Normally a ballot measure would be anticipated and planned for well ahead of time, and a campaign organization would be built. There was no time for that here. In this case, a core group of dedicated

library supporters made all the difference. Basically, a small group composed of Friends of the Library volunteers, Board of Trustees members, city officials, and staff (working on our own time to campaign, of course) quickly took action. A political action committee was formed. The Friends group immediately contributed \$1,000, and donations from the community were solicited. Board member Chris Guernsey is credited with raising over \$2,000 in just a few days. The money was used in traditional ways familiar to library campaigners: A constant flow of information was presented to voters throughout the voting period, especially during the two weeks after ballots were mailed.

The political action committee decided that the limited funds and time available could best be used on a mailing targeted to precincts that had voted favorably on library measures in the past, on personal endorsement ads in the daily newspaper, *The World*, and on radio messages.

The promotional mailing went out just as voters were receiving their ballots in the mail. Whether it was because of a targeted mailing or in spite of it, the measure was approved in every city precinct.

Sixteen small personal endorsement ads were scheduled in the newspaper to run every day from the time ballots were mailed until the last day of voting. The 16 people represented different constituencies in the community and were familiar to various groups. The ads were run again in a shopper sent to all residents.

Two sets of radio spots were created addressing key issues. Each spot was aired on different groups of radio stations aimed at different audiences. The spots were scheduled so that one group aired as ballots were received, and the second set aired closer to election day. All three — mailing, newspaper ads, and radio spots — emphasized the library's space needs, urged a yes vote, and sought to overcome anticipated voter concerns by addressing particular issues.

The World newspaper was incredibly supportive, opting to run frequent articles about library building issues and other library activities. It ran three very favorable editorials. Requests for coverage of specific voter concerns that emerged during the campaign got immediate and positive responses.

Mayor Joanne Verger and City Manager Bill Grile took a very active role in creating a high degree of voter awareness by constantly disseminating objective information about the library building proposal. Some of this information dissemination took traditional forms: speaking to community groups and doing radio interviews. An issue of the city's quarterly newsletter to Coos Bay residents was published in October and featured the library project.

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The mayor and city manager also used some very effective non-traditional methods of getting information to the public. Mayor Verger planned two tapings by the local public access television station. One was a half-hour roundtable discussion giving objective information about the building expansion, the use of urban renewal money, and the advisory question itself. An experienced facilitator agreed to lead the group, which consisted of the city manager, library board chair, project architect, and me. The city attorney stood by to make sure all information discussed was purely objective in nature! The second taping was an hour-long "Walk Through the Library," very capably narrated by the mayor, with participation by me and two other staff members. The unrehearsed program was taped at different times during the same day, capturing the variety of library users and activities. Both segments aired frequently on the public access TV channel during the entire election period. Public feedback indicated that both programs were seen and positively received by large numbers of people.

Each week the city manager issues the Friday Update, a brief information sheet to the City Council containing capsule descriptions of city activities. He included something in the Friday Update about the building proposal or the ballot measure every week, beginning with the council's initial approval of the advisory question. The Friday Update is mailed to many individuals, made available in the library in print format, and appears on the city's Web page. It is also sent via electronic mail to a growing list of community residents. This e-mail communication has proven to be very effective for the city, winning an award for excellence from the League of Oregon Cities. Items from the publication are often picked up by the news media. It proved a very effective tool for educating voters about the library.

Library staff participated in the effort to disseminate objective information. A fact sheet was created and distributed in the library, as well as to community groups such as Rotary and to employee groups and retail customers through the cooperation of various businesses and organizations. In all, over 3,000 fact

sheets were distributed. The fact sheet also appeared on the library's Web page. Talks were given at meetings of various organizations; television and radio interviews were held. Library staff fielded many questions about the project, which seemed a good sign that public awareness had been heightened.

A preliminary building design created by project architect Richard P. Turi and was used in all aspects of the campaign. It was displayed in the library, at city hall, and at community meetings. Copies of it appeared in the city's newsletter, in *The World* newspaper, and on the library's Web page. It can still be viewed at <http://coos.or.us/~cblib>. During the course of the campaign, everyone involved found themselves putting out "brush fires," answering concerns that arose from the public. Some were addressed in one-on-one conversations. Others needed widespread coverage. Many of the questions had been anticipated and were addressed in the fact sheet and in campaign material but needed to be discussed again. There were questions about urban renewal financing, and the fact that no new tax was involved needed to be emphasized. The differences between the current project and the larger project cut short a year earlier needed to be explained. There was confusion over the relationship between city funding for a library building and countywide library district funding for library operations, especially at a time when library services had been cut due to Measure 50.

When November 3 had come and gone, the city Urban Renewal Agency took the strong affirmative vote as a mandate to move forward immediately with the proposed expansion. The project is well on its way, and construction is scheduled to begin in May 1998. The wide margin of approval at the polls also demonstrates that the community feels strong general support for the library, a fact that will prove beneficial in many ways. The whole experience showed the importance of building a core of dedicated supporters, as well as identifying and encouraging community members ready to advocate for their library when the need arises. 