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"Don't fret, the voters in Klamath County have always made the right decision."

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When I was asked to relate the story of the passage of our local option levy that is currently funding the Klamath County Library my first thought was that I now had the opportunity to express my appreciation to all our colleagues who contributed to the success of the measure. To those who gave us the inspiration, the tactical and legal advice, copies of handouts and facts sheets, and examples of different documentation required to place a measure on the ballot, thank

“Don’t Fret, the Voters in Klamath County Have Always Made the Right Decision.”

by Andy Swanson
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you. I especially want to thank Ralph Delamarter, former Deschutes County Library Director, for this tactical advice, Gail Warner Director in Josephine for the copies of their fact sheets, Ronnie Budge in Jackson County for the example they provided of a model campaign, and last but not least Jim Scheppke and the staff at the State Library for their vision. The vote was so close in our election that if anyone had done any less it would not have passed. In order for the election to be certified a 17,200 voter turn out was required, approximately 17,400 votes were cast.

The second thought that came to mind in describing the passage of the levy was to make clear that the State Statutes regarding the election laws were carefully observed. The handout we received from Lake Oswego dealing with the rights and responsibilities of public employees was very useful in this regard. The literature that was prepared and presentations made by the Library Advisory Board Members and myself were carefully prepared so they would not be interpreted as promoting the levy nor as persuading the voter. Besides, some of you may remember reading in the ALA’s 1966 Minimum Standard for Public Library Systems, that “This country should never be presented with the spectacle of a public librarian pleading with such a body for funds.”

Fortunately, the law forbids pleading, otherwise I can recall some occasions when I almost succumbed during that period when the ballots were first mailed out and when the Election Clerk unsealed the tabulation equipment. Indeed, up to the time that the ballots were mailed out the events that transpired were part of the election process with which we are all probably far too familiar. The library staff took part in the arduous tasks facilitating public hearings, public notifications, and submitting the appropriate paper work. Then we watched the Political Action Committee - LIFT (Library Improvement for Tomorrow) take shape and implement a campaign to inform and persuade the voter. However, a picture developed during the three week period while the

voters had their “mail out” ballots that brought into focus the real impact of the 50% turn out requirement included in Measure 47. A few days before the ballots were mailed out a former County Commissioner, Nell Kuonen, told me “don’t fret, the voters in Klamath County have always made the right decision.” In retrospect, I see I should have taken her counsel to heart, but during those 21 days in March, I now admit it, I did send out a number of resumes.

The LIFT-PAC monitored how many ballots arrived at the election office each day. We understood from some experts that a peak was to be expected in the number of returns after the fifth day. However, about 800 ballots were returned each of the 21 days that the ballots were out. As the last week approached the community became aware that there might not be enough votes cast to validate the election. In that last week about 30,000 registered voters were either visited or called by dozens of campaign volunteers urging them to get out and do their civic duty. On the first day after the “polls closed”, the Election Clerk announced that the required number had been received with about 200 extra, on the second day the Clerk announced that about 250 of the ballots that had been returned by the post office marked “undeliverable” did not have the official stamp of the Post Master, on the third day the Clerk announced that the Department of Elections ruled that the carriers’ notes were satisfactory and the election was valid. Nor did the Election Clerk have an easy time determining the number of registered voters in Klamath County. There is a time lag in the mechanism that is used to update the voter rolls. A percentage of the population not only moves in and out of the county, but within the county as well, and do not notify the Election Clerk.

This was the first time the voters in Klamath County were asked if they would pay extra taxes to support their library. The importance they placed on the question was reflected when at least half of them turned out to vote, and 74% of those voted yes. If you asked me what I think will be the voters response in the year 2,000 I would quote the former County Commissioner, “Don’t fret, the voters have always made the right decision.” However, the text of the question the voters may see next time will be complicated by the formula that Measure 50 has established that requires local option levies to reduce their revenue before entities with a permanent tax base. 

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