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What happened?

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Whenever I go to a service club or neighborhood group to talk about the Eugene Public Library, I get two reactions: "What's wrong with Eugene that we can't seem to get a new library? Have you seen the new library at X?" and "Why doncha' just ___?" (Fill in the blank with your favorite bright idea.)

Both comments, I think, are illustrative of the reasons EPL has the dubious distinction of failing two bond issue elections in one year by one percent or less.

What Happened?

by Carol Hildebrand
Director
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The history really began with a 12 member citizen planning committee, commissioned by the City Council and working closely with the library board. The committee spent 18 months in 1986-88 on three rounds of public meetings, surveys and

response forms, two architects, and a library consultant (lacking only the partridge and pear tree) to recommend a new main library in a central location downtown, followed by branch libraries.

The response of the City Council and then city manager was to propose instead a joint building project with an out-of-state developer on a different site with an elaborate tax-increment financing scheme. Not to anyone's surprise, the 1989 advisory vote failed 4-1, and the proposed office tower was never built.

In 1990, with some new members, the city council decided to investigate the feasibility of remodeling and expanding the just-vacated Sears building at yet a different location downtown. A second round of architectural studies, plans, and public meetings resulted in an advisory vote to purchase the site, but no money for the project was included in the question. In the meantime, Measure 5 had passed, and the council was very concerned (with justification, as

*If you can't feed 'em,
don't breed 'em!*

it turned out) about its impact on the city's budget. Still, they wanted to do something, so they asked if they should buy the building, with funding to be sought later. In March 1991 this question got a 70 percent yes vote, and the city bought the building. Then nothing happened for two years — except for a steady stream of library patrons asking when construction would start. Of course, they thought they had voted for the money too! In 1993 the City Council decided they had too many boards and commissions and eliminated about 25 of them, including the library board.

A new City Council in mid-1993 decided it was time to get back to the library. However, various members were unable to agree on priorities for fire stations, funds for long-delayed major maintenance on city buildings and pools, and a new library building. Some did not think we should build anything new ("If you can't feed 'em, don't breed 'em!").

The only proposal upon which all would agree included everything, for a total of \$56.2 million, of which \$19 million was for the library. Supporters and staff warned that this large and unfocused a proposal would very likely fail. They urged that at least the components be separate questions if they must be on the same ballot. But some councilors insisted on all or nothing. Rather than risk individual councilor's campaigning against a measure, "all" went on the May 17, 1994 primary ballot.

Supporters launched a strong election campaign. The political action committee was a coalition of 15 community groups, among them the Chamber of Commerce, AFSCME, League of Women Voters, Hispanic Business Association, Eugene Education Association, countywide labor council, Downtown Eugene Inc., and of course the Friends of EPL and EPL Foundation. The campaign included the usual voters' pamphlet statements, mailings and ads, plus a parade, two rallies, and newsletters to the 200 or so volunteers. The mayor campaigned energetically, but most of the City Council stayed out of the race.

This was one of those elections where supporters went to bed ahead by some 400 votes, but when the absentee ballots were tallied the next morning, the measure failed by 336 votes out of 30,856 ultimately cast.

Local pundits had predicted a decisive loss, so losing by only one percent was considered a credit to the campaign. The post-election survey confirmed that, if the issues had been presented separately, the library and fire station would have passed.

So the City Council appointed a subcommittee to prepare a second bond proposal, just for the library, for the general election. Still concerned about operating costs, the subcommittee and city manager decided to add \$7 million to the proposal for books and computer equipment for 10 years, plus a construction inflation allowance. They did not consult with supporters or staff (and there was no library board), much less the community. The first time the additional money was discussed in public was in the council meeting certifying the measure for the ballot.

EPL supporters had a little more than 60 days to raise a second campaign fund, recruit volunteers, do all the activities again, and explain to the voters how the project had grown by \$7 million in five months.

Active opponents consisted of three men over age 75 who filed their PAC as "No Unfair Taxes" and

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abbreviated on their signs as "NUTS," but they were enough. The increased amount in the project strengthened their anti-city and anti-tax approach, especially with over-60 voters.

Moreover, Lane County Elections had converted its computer system over the summer and was unable to supply registered voter labels until just before the absentee ballots went into the mail.


Eugene Public Library has heroic supporters. The November measure garnered 24,527 votes (or almost 10,000 more than in May) but this time it failed by 135 votes out of 49,189 cast — about one third of one percent. Again, the absentee ballots made the difference. And this City measure was the very last item on a ballot containing 20 state ballot measures, other local measures, and candidates. More than 1,800 voters failed to address it.

So what did we learn? The quality of your relationship with political leaders and the quality of their leadership are critical. As my favorite local leader says, "Just because they got elected to the City Council doesn't mean they understand politics."

Don't assume the voters will remember anything — at least anything positive — from previous planning,

research, public input, or decisions. Each time you return to an issue, you have to start from the beginning. At least in Eugene, before people are willing to hear about an issue, they have to be listened to. Never mind that their bright ideas have been rehashed repeatedly. These folks either did not notice or were not here at the time. People in Eugene do not readily accept expert opinion. You must not only ask for and consider input, but make sure to do it visibly and tell everybody repeatedly that you are!


This is not news but bears emphasis: The campaign is too late to convince anyone. Persuasion must come before a proposal makes the ballot. The measure must be straightforward and clearly defined. If an explanation is required, it is doomed. With vote-by-mail, the campaign is even more important. If you do not get all the yes votes in, your issue will be decided by those folks who have nothing to do but look at that ballot on their kitchen table for two weeks. And with current law, absentee ballots make primary and general elections into de facto vote-by-mail.

At least we don't give up. In 1998, with new City Council interest and a new city manager, we are beginning a new citizen planning committee to begin a new planning process from scratch. Stay tuned. 

I Was There

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We owe much to Nan Heim and Craig Berkman for their hard work. In the next session, OLA must clearly define its goals, submit the measures we support early, and encourage our legislative champions in their efforts. The legislative committee is already working on a legislative agenda.

With the library community speaking with one voice, we will surely gain the support we need and deserve. 

Ed House is the Director of the Albany Public Library and was the 1996-97 OLA president, during the past legislative session. Ed had the unique experience of being the only OLA president so far to be involved in flying (in a private plane) to several press conferences around the state in one day!