Reflections and Advice on Running an Informational Millage Campaign

ANONYMOUS

ABSTRACT

This article outlines a step-by-step strategy of how to run an informational millage campaign. It includes advice and lessons learned.

On August 8, 2023, I knew one thing for certain: At the end of the night, I was getting a drink.

A *strong* one.

What I did not know was whether that drink would be in victory or defeat.

August 8, 2023, was the day voters in my county decided my library's fate: Would they vote to extend our property tax — the *only* dedicated funding for the system — or would they reject it and force us to come back at a lower rate?

This vote had been the one thing on my mind since taking over communications for the system three months prior. Though it was never implicitly stated, I knew getting this tax passed was *the* reason I was hired.

Worrying about the vote was unfamiliar territory for the library system. The millage was approved in the 1990s, and voters overwhelmingly supported it every time it came up for renewal. Historically, the system was seen as one of the treasures of the county, and the public was proud to defend it, use it, and fund it.

And out of nowhere, everything changed.

The library system and county became engulfed in the book content debate, leading to hours-long board meetings, increased oversight from elected officials, exaggerated truths, and misinformation that bordered on dishonesty.

This change occurred about a year before the vote, damaging all the goodwill the system had earned over several decades — in which it grew from a rural library housed in a small room to an award-winning system spanning multiple state-of-the-art branches.

On August 8, 2023, we would learn just *how* damaged.

This article will not be a foolproof plan list of how to run an informational millage campaign. All I can give is my system's experience passing (yes, it passed!) a millage in contentious times. Our strategies may not work for you, and you may have other ideas of your own.

But in my view, the most important takeaway from this article is knowing that, even if it doesn't seem like it, library support still outweighs the loud (oftentimes *much* louder) opposition.

Even if your library is in a hostile environment. Even if all you can legally do is inform people of the vote and hope they see your library's value enough to go out and vote on your behalf. Even if you don't have a fundraising group that can buy signs, billboards, and ads asking people to vote "yes." Even if all you see on social media is negativity and lies.

Even if everything seems to be working against you, your supporters are still out there, and they want to show their support.

Our system is proof.

Start Early, Present the Facts, Know Your Public

Before accepting the library's communications position, I had zero experience in a library's communications position.

That meant I also had zero experience organizing an informational millage campaign.

While it can be hard to accept not knowing something — especially when that *something* can influence the lives of 100 coworkers and thousands of library users — for me, it brought clarity.

I quickly realized (after trying and failing spectacularly) that I did *not* have to reinvent the wheel for our campaign, because I had *not* been the first person to run one. All I had to do was get advice from those who had done it before.

I did, however, have a deep understanding of the issues the system faced, having followed the local politics for several years. So I knew who the players were, what groups to speak with, what issues we faced, and what questions I needed to be able to answer.

So, this is my first piece of advice: *Understand what you know, know it well, and know who to call for the things you don't know*.

In the initial stages, I had numerous talks with other communications directors and government officials who had tried to pass taxes in previous years. Though their situations were different than mine, the main takeaways from those conversations can be narrowed down to three basic tips:

- It's never too early to start alerting the public
- Give plenty of facts, but NEVER give an opinion
- Gauge the public with polling and survey

These conversations occurred about three months before the vote, and during those talks, I discovered that many people — *including* our supporters — were unaware that our millage was even on the ballot. You can have all the supporters in the world, but if they don't know the tax renewal is on the ballot, they aren't going to the polls.

We immediately set out to change that, which brings up another piece of advice: *If you're afraid of starting too early, don't be*. When it comes to anything regarding politics or taxes, every email, every public meeting, every social media post, and every interaction counts. And the more time you give yourself, the more opportunities you'll have to disseminate information.

Had we known what we know now, we would've started informing the public as soon as we knew it would be on the ballot — not less than 12 weeks before.

So, we started informing the public, and that began with a simple survey asking patrons a few basic questions:

- Were they aware the library's millage was on the ballot?
- Were they aware this funded everything the system offers?
- Were they aware of everything their library offers?

• Did they believe the library was a good steward of public funds?

The last two questions are just as important as the first two. If they answered "no" to the last two, they were more likely to answer "no" on the first two — and more likely to answer "no" on their ballot. We also asked them to leave comments on anything they wished regarding the library. We found out that, among our patrons, we still had a stellar reputation — something library systems need to remember to avoid getting swept up in the backlash that can proliferate online.

After the patron survey, we polled the general public with identical questions. We learned that 3 out of every 4 respondents had at least a "favorable" view of the system — another reminder that things weren't all doom and gloom.

Another piece of advice: There is value in gauging both library users *and* the general public. It is important to remember (and unfortunately, this gets lost at times), that libraries are for *all* people, meaning we must understand what *all* people think about and want from their library — even those who don't use the library or who oppose it. Libraries are supposed to be above the fray.

Next, we had to determine *how* to inform the public. What sort of information should we provide? How should that information be presented? Where should that information be found?

And as a publicly funded institution, there were certain things we could not do, mainly: We could NEVER tell people how to vote. That is the *most* important thing to remember.

Again, I had to ask these questions to others who knew better than me, only this time I contacted more people. Along with the PIOs and government officials I had spoken with before, I connected with EveryLibrary, which gave me a blueprint to follow.

Or more accurately, *many* blueprints to follow.

EveryLibrary sent me a plethora of sample flyers, pamphlets, posters, infographics, and other materials from dozens of other millage campaigns. I spent multiple days searching through each document, saving the ones that were applicable for us. Many of those documents contained information I had not considered providing, such as:

• System-wide stats over the previous year, pertaining to circulation, program attendance, Internet usage, etc.
• System-wide stats from the previous decade
• How much a property tax would cost homeowners based on their home's value
• Annual budgets and how taxpayer money is spent
• The economic benefits patrons enjoy because of the library
• Future goals

For someone who was new at this, discovering these previous campaigns was like finding buried treasure. Again, I did *not* have to reinvent the wheel. I just had to create a script using snippets of what others had written.

Which brings me to another tip: *It's okay to look to others for guidance.* We are ALL in this together.

Be Transparent, Honest, and Willing To Answer Any Questions From Any Person

After conducting our surveys and determining what parts of other campaigns we wanted to emulate, we started presenting information wherever we could. That began with creating a page on our website dedicated to the millage.

This page was divided into multiple sections, such as:

- **A sample ballot**. We wanted the public to see exactly what they'd see on the ballot.
- **What a "yes" vote means and what a "no" means**. We wanted the public to understand exactly what each vote meant *as well as* how each outcome of the vote would affect the library. We wanted it to be as easy to understand as possible.
- **FAQs**. We brainstormed questions people might have and answered them, then we added more questions as more came in.
- **The library's mission and vision statements**. We wanted people to see what our commitment to the community was.
- **The library's history, stats, accomplishments, and plans**. We wanted people to see everything their library had done and planned to do. It was important for people to see how their tax dollars were spent.
- **Ways to contact us**. We wanted people to be able to contact us with any questions they had. (As an aside, I put my name, work email, and office number in this section, because I wanted to be the one answering those questions. It builds better trust when people see a person to contact instead of a position or building.) This section also contained a schedule of public meetings we had to explain the millage.

Here's another piece of advice: *Put all your initial effort and focus into creating this webpage.* This is the place where you'll house all the information for press releases, talking points, social media posts, and emails. Once you have all the information you think is relevant on this page, all you'll have to do after is pull from it.

And here's another piece of advice: *Make sure this webpage is highly visible on your website, ideally on your homepage.* You want as many people to see it as possible.

Once the webpage was made, we began visiting local councils, boards, non-profits, and other entities to present information on the millage. Most of these meetings were livestreamed, so in my mind, this was free publicity to talk about the library's great services and remind more people of the impending vote.

Next piece of advice: *You must put yourself out there, otherwise you're relying on people to come find you for information.*

At each meeting, we gave a short presentation, handed out flyers and informational packets, passed around a QR code to our millage webpage, and answered questions. We stayed after each meeting and answered more questions, whether they came from elected officials or those in attendance.

And our message in these meetings stayed consistent: We wanted people to fully understand what their vote meant and what the millage (or their tax dollars) was used for. How they voted was not our concern. I told countless people that my job was *not* to convince them how to vote: It was to make sure they had all the necessary and accurate information before making their vote.

Inside our libraries, we made sure information was available, but we kept from going overboard. We had a flyer displayed in one or two spots in our branches, we had a QR code flyer at the front circulation desks, and we gave away small handouts when people checked out items, but that was about it.

In my mind, the importance of the vote could *not* trump the importance of the library itself. Our biggest selling point (and the biggest selling point for *any* library system) are the services offered to the public. Nothing replaces that.

On that same note, we made sure our social media posts and emails did the same: We regularly, though not frequently, reminded people of the vote, but we made sure we constantly highlighted all the great services we offer. Numerically, up to two posts a week were tax-related (usually just one), while the other 15 or so were about the library itself. I sent out two emails regarding the vote in a two-month span.

Another piece of advice on social media: *It can be helpful, and it can be hurtful. Let it be helpful*. For me, this was the best place to find out what issues I needed to be ready to address, because this is where people let you know exactly how they feel. So, we scoured every post, comment, and message we could find, negative or positive, to better understand how people were feeling about the library.

Stay Positive and Don't Get Defeated Before the Results Come In

On the day of the vote, I met my directors at one of our branches where we planned to await the results. An hour or so before the polls closed, I typed up two brief statements, one for each outcome.

Dispirited, one of them looked at me and said, "Don't worry about the victory one. I've already accepted this is not going to pass."

He wasn't the only one thinking that way. Our millage was the only county-wide item on the ballot, and things had gotten rough in the week leading to the vote. The negativity on social media reached its crescendo, and it was impossible to ignore. Here's a sample of some of the lies people spread:

- The library had porn available to kids.
- The library mismanaged its funds.
- The library had millions in another bank account.
- No one used the library.
- The library could survive on half of what it got.

And to make matters worse: Some of the commentators were either in public office, had run for public office, or were direct representatives of someone in public office, so their words *meant* something. Among our leadership and staff, morale was as low as it had ever been.

After the polls closed, we waited about two hours for the final results. It was the longest, most stressful two-hour stretch of my life.

Early voting results came first, and they had us slightly ahead, 51 percent to 49 percent. As more precincts reported their results, our lead grew, at one point reaching54 percent. For the first time in weeks, we felt optimistic.

Then our lead slowly shrank. With each new precinct, our advantage became smaller and smaller. I can't imagine how many times I hit refresh on my laptop. I just know that my index finger felt raw for days. At one point, our lead got down to less than 100 votes. I texted my wife, "This is going to fail."

Though I hate being wrong, this was one instance I'm glad I was. It didn't fail. It barely passed, but passed nonetheless. Of all the taxes on the ballot in our county in 2023, the library's tax was the *only* one that passed. It was something *no one* thought was possible.

About an hour after the polls closed, I sat alone at a bar, enjoying my celebratory drink.

Never Forget: Your Supporters Are Out There

Again, this article is not foolproof. And even though our tax passed, it *narrowly* passed, so perhaps we could've done things differently to get better results.

But the main takeaway is this: No matter the challenges your library system is facing, you still have supporters out there. And though they're quieter, they outnumber the detractors, even if it doesn't seem like it.

Our library was embroiled in the book content debate for more than a year leading up to the vote. Had everything been based on social media chatter, we would've lost the vote, *spectacularly*.

But our supporters did show up, and against all odds, our funding was secured for another decade.

I'll drink to that.