



SPECIAL REPORT:

Funding School Needs

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The traditional approach for funding school needs, such as facility improvements or additional operating needs, has relied upon a process that prepares options, cost and financing options. The plan is carefully prepared by staff, school officials and sometimes representatives from the general public. This plan is then presented to the public for “buy-in.” This buy-in is generally necessary regardless of the type of funding. A number of school districts have found that including the public earlier in this planning process provides a better final result and increases community support for the project. Another key distinction between this process and the traditional approach is that this process involves school officials as policy leaders throughout the process. Traditional approaches focus on school official involvement at the beginning and end stages. The basic elements of the process include the following steps:

COMMUNICATE THE PROBLEM

- Identify the implications of not addressing or solving the problem – the building space or operating revenue needs.
- If possible, forecast the problem in advance of the need to address it.
- Explain impact of not solving the building space or operating revenue needs as outcome statements and impact on residents and customers.
- Develop a chronology that documents the problem and the history of efforts to address it.
- Develop chronology of project communications throughout the process.
- Develop methods to assess community understanding of problem and impact of problem on community.
- Develop communications plan to support effort.

COMMUNICATE THE PROCESS

- Develop a process appropriate to problem (i.e. task force, staff report, commission study, etc.).
- Communicate process including specific opportunities for broader public involvement.
- Establish clear expectations regarding community involvement.
- Hold an open house to communicate the problem and the process.

- Solicit suggestions for changes in the process.
- Communicate the community response to the facility or operating needs back to the public.
- Request options to be evaluated.
- Review and refine problem statement.
- Maintain the communications chronology.



COMMUNICATE THE OPTIONS

- Communicate options generated from process, including funding, building improvement options, location (if an issue), building cost, etc.
- Develop clear evaluation criteria for options including advantages and disadvantages.
- Hold an open house on the options.
- Request feedback on additional options.
- Request feedback on evaluation criteria.
- Request feedback on evaluation.
- Reaffirm problem statement & process.
- Maintain communications chronology.

COMMUNICATE THE SELECTED OPTION

- Communicate selected option.
- Respond specifically to suggested options and evaluation criteria.
- Communicate basis for selection.
- Provide balanced evaluation including disadvantages of option.
- Reaffirm problem statement, process and options.
- Maintain chronology.
- Identify next steps for implementation and future opportunities for public involvement.

Community participation is typically centered around “open houses” held at strategic times during the process. In some cases multiple open house meetings are needed to seek community feedback. It is vital to assess public acceptance prior to proceeding to the next step in the process. For example, if the public is not accepting that there is a need for the school improvements under study, additional efforts should be undertaken to communicate the need before proceeding to the options stage. School officials play a key role in this process. Their assessment of community support during various phases is critical. Other key features of this process include developing a communication plan that will encourage broad based community involvement at open houses and in the process in general.

SCHOOL REFERENDUM COMMUNICATIONS

Communications is more than good writing.

Building support for school facility improvements and operating levies involves developing and implementing a strategic communications program. A Strategic School Referendum Communications Program does the following:

- Acknowledges and respects the need for public input and support for school improvements and operating funds;
- Forecasts time frame, upcoming decisions and opportunities for public involvement;
- Encourages questions;
- Provides a context for the school improvements with both a historical chronology, problem statement and goals, and an answer to “why change?”;
- Identifies direct and indirect issues; and,
- Responds to concerns.

A Strategic School Referendum Communications Program should contain the elements:

- **Strategic Communications Plan** – identifying the target audiences, key messages, communications goals, tools, tactics and strategies, and developed with the input and buy-in of school officials.
- **Open Houses** – providing opportunities at critical points in the planning process for the public to learn more and provide feedback on school improvement plans and operating needs.
- **Q&A Newsletters** – sent communitywide to inform the public and address issues prior to open houses and to “feedback the feedback” after open houses. The Q&A format provides the opportunity to address current issues and concerns of the public in a timely manner.
- **Strategic News Releases** – prior to open houses that not only inform of the open houses but also provide context and meaning for the open house and the school needs.
- **Website, Cable TV, Newsletters, etc.** – providing repetitive opportunities to inform the public about the project and its status, forecast issues and repeat key messages.
- **Issues Fact Sheet** – provides a summary of information regarding basic school needs, including goals, features and characteristics.