The goal of the campaign was to avoid a 17% cut to King County Metro Transit (Metro) bus service by building sufficient support for a local option fee in the form of a two-year $20 vehicle-tab (an extra vehicle license fee), which would close a $60 million per year budget gap through 2013.

WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF THE CAMPAIGN?

On August 15, 2011, the King County Council passed a two-year $20 vehicle license fee dubbed “congestion reduction charge” with a vote of 7-2. Car owners who pay this fee automatically also receive $24 worth of Metro bus tickets, which they can choose to donate to a pool of human-service agencies. At the same time, the vote phased out an existing subsidy of $2.4 million per year from the city of Seattle and King County that paid for the free-ride zone in downtown Seattle.

WHY WAS THE CAMPAIGN INITIATED?

Metro provides the city of Seattle and King County with bus service and is run by the county. It is the largest transit agency in Washington with more than 386,000 unlinked trips per weekday in 2009. Over the years, Metro’s funding base had been eroded in various ways. Previously, the state had levied a motor vehicle excise tax (“MVET”) and allowed for a local option MVET for mass transit systems. In 1999, the MVET was repealed and replaced with a much smaller annual license fee (down to $30 from about $200). In 2002, legislation clarified that the legislature also intended to repeal the local option MVET. As a result, Metro’s operations since then had been largely financed by 0.9% of the county sales tax. Prior to the campaign, approximately 65% of the transit agency’s operating budget relied on this portion of the sales tax. Falling sales tax revenues—as a result of the recession and growing internet sales—left Metro with a $60 million per year funding gap, necessitating a 17% service cut.

HOW WAS THE CAMPAIGN STRUCTURED?

The campaign to close Metro’s funding gap through a congestion reduction charge had two consecutive stages: a lobbying effort led by Transportation Choices Coalition (“TCC”) to pass state legislation and a grassroots campaign directed by TCC through the Transit Rescue Coalition (“TRC”) targeting the county council.

BACKGROUND

Because transit agencies in the State of Washington are legally limited to receiving no more than 0.9% of the sales tax, increasing the allocation—as had been done in other parts of the state—was not an option in King County. The Washington State Legislature therefore first needed to pass

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WHAT FORMAL STEPS WERE REQUIRED FOR THE CAMPAIGN TO SUCCEED?

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Legislation to allow King County to consider an additional tax to fund Metro. Instead of the sales tax or the MVET, the legislature considered a vehicle license fee, which unlike the MVET costs the same regardless of the price of the car, the most politically feasible option.

The proposed legislation therefore sought to provide King County with the opportunity to impose a temporary congestion reduction charge on top of the existing state-based motor vehicle license fee. After a broader transportation bill had failed, the King County-specific legislation was passed, but only with an amendment that required the county council to approve the fee with a super-majority.

The King County Council has nine members, so six favorable votes were required. At the time the Council was made up of five Democrats and four Republicans; in order to impose the fee advocates expected they would need to convince all five Democrats and at least one Republican member. With a simple majority of five votes (instead of six), the council could have sent the proposal to voters for approval in November of 2011.

What Was the Political Climate at the Time of the Campaign?

While both chambers and the executive branch in the state of Washington are controlled by Democrats, the balance in the Senate has been tenuous for a while, and the Governor has never been thought of as strong on transit issues. Senator Mary Margaret Haugen, the chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, is a rural legislator who wields a lot of power and is openly opposed to transit. An effort to pass a larger transportation bill with four local revenue options failed in 2010.

King County is considered a major center for liberal politics, but some portions of the county tend to be more conservative, even to the extent that residents of the eastern part have expressed interest in seceding. Since the 1990s, initiatives and legislation that reduce revenue for transportation and other government services and limit the ability of local government to raise revenue have passed in Washington.

Of late, however, ballot initiatives which proposed to raise the local sales tax to make additional revenue for transit available passed in other parts of the state. In addition, recent efforts by Metro to improve its efficiency and cut its costs increased the transit agency’s credibility and provided a good foundation for making the case to the legislature that the budget gap was a real problem.

WHAT PREVIOUS PLANNING, RESEARCH, OR ADVOCACY EFFORTS BENEFITED THE CAMPAIGN?

In March of 2010, King County formed the Regional Transit Task Force (RTTF), made up of elected officials, representatives from labor and business, and other community stakeholders from throughout the county, to provide a transit vision. The RTTF was formed as Metro was facing competing pressures: on one hand, strong demand for transit services countywide; on the other, rising costs and a steep decline in sales-tax revenues.

In this context, the RTTF was asked to identify short- and long-term objectives for transit service investment and to formulate a service implementation policy based on those objectives. One of the recommendations coming out of the RTTF was for Metro and a broad coalition of community and business interests to pursue state legislation to create additional revenue sources that would provide a long-term, more sustainable base of revenue support for transit services. At the same time, during the failed attempt to pass a larger transportation bill in 2010, TCC and its coalition partners were able to generate significant media attention and develop the legislative champions necessary to create a better political space and momentum for the congestion reduction charge.

Campaign Finance

How Was the Legislative Campaign Funded?

The legislative campaign did not have a budget. Representatives from various stakeholders lobbied at their own expense. TCC used its general operating and program funds.
HOW WAS THE TRANSIT RESCUE COALITION CAMPAIGN FUNDED?

The TRC mobilized for a discreet goal of convincing the King County Council to vote in favor of the congestion reduction charge. Because this was conducted in a short timeframe, over two and a half months, TCC self-funded their organizing and coalition coordinating efforts out of general operating and program funds since this campaign was consistent with their overall programmatic goals. Other coalition members also donated their time in-kind. For other similar-sized, i.e., small, campaigns around the state, TCC usually raises about $100,000 on top of its general funding from labor, local businesses, and transit contractors.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

WHAT WERE THE MAIN COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF THIS CAMPAIGN?

A major challenge was that the media's initial coverage centered on the increased costs to car owners during an economic downturn, rather than the disproportionately higher impact on transit riders if the initiative failed. A second challenge was that several King County Council members representing communities outside of Seattle did not initially support the congestion reduction charge because they viewed it as a concern specific and limited to Seattle.

HOW WERE THESE CHALLENGES MET?

The TRC created a powerful public face of who would be impacted by mobilizing thousands of people who depended on the bus system to commute to their jobs. The campaign highlighted three key impacts of what would happen if the congestion reduction charge was not implemented. First, bus riders would be left stranded at bus stops, unable to get to work. Second, hundreds of thousands of cars would be added to the local streets and freeways, thereby compounding congestion problems. Third, the economy would suffer if people were not able to commute to jobs and access retail stores.

To this end, TRC, for example, organized the public delivery of a petition with 10,000 signatures at a 1,000-car park-and-ride facility of this strategy was that the authorization was intentionally limited to two years in order to keep King County, and its transit advocates, hungry for more in 2014. For the second phase of the campaign, advocates focused on convincing individual King County Council members to vote in favor of the congestion reduction charge. The goal was to produce an overwhelming response from the public from all parts of the county that county council members could not ignore the need to act.
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TCC was able to call on the significant ongoing relationships it had developed with transportation stakeholders over the eighteen years of its existence. TCC was also able to build on the connections Rob Johnson, TCC's executive director, had formed as a member of the RTTF. For the legislative lobbying campaign, TCC worked with the lobbyists for King County to bring together the business, labor, environmental, and social justice coalition needed to make the congestion reduction charge authorization a top-priority for the legislature. TCC organized an advocacy day on which between 200 and 300 people lobbied their legislators to support the bill.

For the grassroots campaign, TCC formed the TRC, which 130 business, environmental, community, and human services organizations, and important individuals joined. These members signed on to letters. A smaller steering committee of twenty to thirty active partners from labor, business, social justice, and environmental groups played a more active role in the grassroots campaign.

Each of TRC’s steering committee member organizations mobilized their constituents to write letters, sign petitions, and testify at hearings in support of the congestion reduction charge. Puget Sound Sage (PSS), a coalition of community, labor, and faith organizations, became one of the key members of the TRC. PSS was critical in providing the public with a face of who would be impacted by the cuts through its ability to turn out members of labor unions and residents from Rainier Beach, a set of transit-dependent, low-income neighborhoods.

On July 12th, over 1,000 people attended a hearing on the proposed service cuts, and more than 300 people waited in line outside the building for hours to testify. While TRC is not taking the credit for turning out all people who testified, the coalition is responsible for harnessing their energy and focusing it to exert continued pressure on the county council members.

WHAT ROLE DID BUSINESSES PLAY IN SUPPORTING THE CAMPAIGN?

Aside from adding powerful voices to the campaign, businesses made significant tangible contributions to the effort. The Downtown Seattle Association, for example, created maps showing where the service cuts would have the biggest impact. This allowed individual business owners and council members to see how the commutes of employees and customers would be affected. Likewise, Swedish Hospital played a particular important role in convincing a council representative from South King County, who had previously regarded the service cuts as a Seattle-only issue, that his own constituents would be negatively impacted if they were unable to commute to their jobs.

More importantly, when the county council considered leaving the decision to adopt a congestion reduction charge to the voters through a ballot initiative at a later date, the Downtown Seattle Association wrote a strongly-worded letter to the Council urging members to vote on the matter directly, suggesting that the business community would not fund a ballot campaign, leaving the Council on the hook to either pass the initiative or be responsible for the repercussions.

INVolVING COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN TRANSPORTATION PLANNING IS CRITICAL FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The RTTF was tasked with developing a strategy to address the funding shortfall, including improving operating efficiency, service cuts, and potential additional source of revenue. RTTF consisted of a broad range of stakeholders,
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including not just transportation experts and elected officials, but also riders, and members of the social service, economic development, labor, education, and environmental communities. All meetings were open to the public, and time was set aside at each meeting to for public comment. This helped to build trust in Metro's decision making process and direction, which in turn was vital to building the broad-based support necessary to prevent the service cuts.

MESSAGING MUST CONVEY THE IMPACT ON EVERYONE, NOT JUST THE DIRECT USERS

The campaign built the support by focusing on how a wide range of constituents would be affected by service cuts. The Downtown Seattle Association showed businesses how their employees would be adversely affected, which would in turn affect their bottom line. Leaders in outlying communities heard about how their residents depended on the transit system to get to work in downtown Seattle. Commuters realized that transit reductions would result in a flood of new cars on the roads, making their trips longer and more frustrating. Everyone had a stake.

FOCUSING ON THE IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES -- RATHER JUST THE FUTURE -- MATTERS

The coalition was able to focus on a specific event in the immediate future—an impending 17% cut in service that would have a specific effect on virtually every community member. Rather than being an abstract future impact, such as an operating deficit that would delay infrastructure maintenance, everyone understood exactly what the service cut would mean. People were able to make the connection to exactly what the added fee would pay for and how they would benefit. This was vital to galvanizing community support for the congestion reduction charge and outrage if it did not pass.

WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE IS NECESSARY AT THE RIGHT TIME

At the end of the day the grassroots effort mobilized by the TRC created the political environment that gave the King County Executive the leverage he needed to negotiate with the two Republican Council members and obtain the necessary votes. This resulted in the approval of the congestion reduction charge but the compromise included the removal of the ride free zone in downtown Seattle, a concession that TRC advocates did not support, but understood was necessary under the circumstances.

Likewise, as part of the larger transportation funding bill the legislature had considered, but rejected, more equitable local revenue options than the vehicle license fee that was ultimately adopted which TCC and many of its coalition partners preferred. The coalition, however, accepted the vehicle license fee, which had been deemed more politically feasible by the legislature, as an acceptable compromise.

POTENTIALLY TRANSFERRABLE IDEAS

- Recruiting companies by creating maps showing where the transit service would be cut and making employers aware of what percentage of their employees rely on transit to get to work
- Public actions designed to gain media attention can help shift the story to how everyone is impacted rather than what the policy change will cost
- Developing support for the transit agency through collaborative planning before funding decisions are made
- Building on previous relationships to support the campaign
- Finding appropriate spokespeople to explain to surrounding communities how they are affected by transportation problems in a central municipality
- Including free transit rides, which can be donated, as part of automobile user fees

Photo Credit: Transportation Choices Coalition