

Northeastern University Dukakis Center for Urban & Regional Policy

TRANSIT CAMPAIGNS:
FINANCING CASE STUDY

2010 ST. LOUIS COUNTY INITIATIVE TO PASS A TRANSIT TAX (PROP A)

BACKGROUND

WHAT WAS THE GOAL OF THE CAMPAIGN?

The goal of the campaign was to raise revenue for Metro Transit - St. Louis ("Metro") to restore service previously cut, to avoid the reinstatement of significant service cuts which had been temporarily avoided, and to expand its bus, light rail, and paratransit systems.

WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF THE CAMPAIGN?

On April 6, 2010, voters in St. Louis County approved a half cent sales tax increase for transit on a ballot with a 63% majority that now raises \$75 million per year to maintain and expand the region's transit system. As a result, St. Louis County, which has almost a million residents, raised a little over \$75 per capita/year for transit. In addition, the new tax triggered another \$8 million per year for transit from the City of St. Louis, which borders but is independent from St. Louis County. This additional funding stems from a quarter cent sales tax increase which was approved by City voters in 1997 but could not be collected or distributed until the County passed its own increase.

WHY WAS THE CAMPAIGN INITIATED?

In 2008, Metro was facing a 30% shortfall (\$45 million) for its next operating budget, in part as a result of a balloon debt payment coming due. To fill this gap and to allow for some light rail expansion, the St. Louis County Council voted to place a question on the ballot (Prop M) that sought voter approval to increase the sales tax within the county by half a cent. In November 2008, Prop M was defeated by a margin of 48.5% to 51.5%.

As a result, early in 2009, Metro was forced to increase fares, lay off 550 workers, cut one-third of its bus routes, suspend service on 2,300 out of 9,000 bus stops, reduce its paratransit program, and decrease service on its light rail system. In August of 2009, Metro received a one-time appropriation

from the state and additional federal stimulus dollars totaling about \$12 million that helped to temporarily restore many of the service cuts, but this infusion of money was only expected to last until May of 2010 at which point service cuts would have had to be reinstated.

HOW WAS THE CAMPAIGN STRUCTURED?

The Prop A campaign has been described as a three-legged stool, consisting of an educational campaign (run by Citizens for Modern Transit ("CMT")) designed to frame the issue around the value of public transit to the region, a political campaign called "Vote Yes on A" (lead by Advance St. Louis), and a get-out-the vote ("GOTV") campaign (coordinated through the Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance).

POLITICAL CONTEXT

WHAT FORMAL STEPS WERE REQUIRED FOR THE CAMPAIGN TO SUCCEED?

First the St. Louis County Council, which at the time consisted of four Democrats and three Republicans, had to vote to place the question on the ballot for April 2010. Facing a tough reelection campaign in 2010, County Executive Charlie Dooley, who had been very supportive of the 2008 Prop M campaign, was lukewarm about the idea of another transit tax proposition, but did ultimately help to get Prop A on the ballot.

After the question was placed on the ballot through a vote along party lines, the proposition had to pass with a simple majority vote on April 6. The ballot question was: "Shall the County of St. Louis impose a countywide sales tax of one-half of one percent for the purpose of providing a source of funds for public transportation purposes including the restoration, operation and expansion of MetroLink, MetroBus, disabled and senior transportation, in addition to an existing sales tax of one-quarter of one percent for the same purpose?"

This case study was prepared in June of 2012 by Rafael Mares and Aviva Rothman-Shore of the Conservation Law Foundation based on interviews with Thomas R. Shrout Jr. of Avvantt Partners LLC, former executive director of CMT, Nancy Cross, Vice President of SEIU Local 1, as well as a review of documents related to the campaign.

WHAT WAS THE POLITICAL CLIMATE AT THE TIME OF THE CAMPAIGN?

The political climate for a revenue-raising measure was terrible. Along with the rest of the country, St. Louis was in a deep recession. The anti-tax Tea Party movement was gaining momentum. Metro's last rail project had been more than \$100 million over budget. A poll showed only 55% support for a transit tax, well short of the 60% generally thought to be necessary to prevail on election day. A very similar ballot initiative had failed in 2008.

WHAT SUPPORT FROM CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS COULD BE EXPECTED?

Initially, due to the poor political climate, the business community was not supportive of the Prop A campaign. Civic Progress, an association of the thirty largest corporations in metropolitan St. Louis, and the Regional Business Council, a consortium of many of the region's mid-cap companies, which had both been prime funders of Prop M, opposed putting the initiative on the ballot because of concerns that voter support was weak and that Metro had not completed sufficient reform efforts to warrant another attempt to raise revenue in 2010. This was a terrible blow for the campaign since conventional wisdom on winning a ballot initiative in St. Louis suggests that one needs the leadership of the business community, and political campaigns are traditionally run by a small group of insiders.

WHAT PREVIOUS PLANNING OR RESEARCH EFFORTS BENEFITED THE CAMPAIGN?

In 2009, Metro embarked on an extensive process to engage members of the St. Louis region in creating a thirty-year plan. This plan, Moving Transit Forward, articulated a regional vision for transit that everyone could benefit from and promised future expansions according to a timetable and outlined various alternative options for such growth. The extensive civic engagement initiated through the creation of Moving Transit Forward helped to undercut the prevailing criticism that Metro could not be trusted and was not accountable to the public.



CAMPAIGN FINANCE

HOW WAS THE EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN FUNDED?

To fund the educational campaign prior to Prop A, CMT, a pro-transit nonprofit organization which leads advocacy efforts for an integrated, affordable, and convenient public transportation system in the St. Louis region, withdrew \$300,000 from its endowment. The St. Clair County Transit District in Illinois, which contracts through Metro for services, stood to benefit from passage of Prop A since about a third of St. Clair County's residents work in downtown St. Louis.

It contributed an additional \$100,000 to the educational campaign. CMT received \$15,000 to \$20,000 in unsolicited donations in response to its television advertisements. In total, counting cash and in-kind expenses, CMT spent about \$525,000 on the educational campaign.

HOW WAS THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN FINANCED?

Advance St. Louis, organized as a campaign committee which explicitly advocated voting yes on the proposition, raised a total of \$1,030,391 with almost \$400,000 (38%) coming from business groups, almost \$170,000 (16%) from Washington University and health care institutions, a little over \$20,000 (2%) from local unions, and another \$20,000 in individual contributions of \$500 or less. With in-kind services included, the campaign estimated that it spent about \$1.1 million on the Vote Yes on A campaign. A little over \$600,000 of this money was spent on media.

HOW WAS THE GOTV CAMPAIGN SUPPORTED?

The Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance, a coalition of over fifty organizations working to improve and expand public transit through the St. Louis region, was started and staffed by CMT. Its short-term goal was to mobilize voters in support of Prop A. Only \$50,000 of the money raised for the Prop A campaign was devoted to the GOTV operation. The Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance relied mostly on volunteers to accomplish its goal.

CAMPAIGN MANAGEMENT/STRUCTURE

WHO LED THE EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGN?

CMT originated and led the educational campaign, developed before Prop A was approved to go on the ballot. Since CMT was making the decisions about how to run the educational campaign and how to spend the money they invested in it alone, they had control over deciding who to hire to create the materials. Despite pressure from the Mayor's Office to use local St. Louis political consultants, CMT hired R&R Partners from Salt Lake City who previously had created public relations materials for multiple other successful transportation campaigns.

WHO LED THE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN?

Advance St. Louis was led by Republican Mayor John Nations of Chesterfield, a suburb which had lost all its bus service as a result of the service cuts. Nations was able to activate officials from both parties to support Prop A. Advance St. Louis was overseen by a forty-member steering committee co-chaired by Dr. Donald Suggs, publisher of the St. Louis American, the leading African-American newspaper, and Washington University Chancellor Mark Wrighton.

This triad was able to mobilize the diverse array of supporters needed to pass Prop A, including businesses, universities, the African-American community, faith-based organizations, and some Republican elected officials. The steering committee helped to coordinate the political campaign with the GOTV effort.

WHO LED THE GOTV CAMPAIGN?

Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance was led by Nancy Cross, Vice President of SEIU Local 1. The union had great interest in this campaign because many of its members had to leave full-time jobs in the suburbs for lower paying part-time jobs in the city due to the service cuts. The coalition attracted a wide range of groups, including the Regional Chamber of Commerce and Growth Association, Metropolitan Congregations United ("MCU"), and Jobs with Justice.

The GOTV campaign was almost entirely volunteer driven with specific members offering unique contributions—the union had the facilities to do phone banking as well as access to voter lists, MCU tapped into the extensive faith-based network in North Country, where many African Americans live, who formed an important voting bloc for the success of Prop A, and Washington University students excelled at responding instantaneously to criticisms of Prop A through social media. At one point the GOTV campaign for Prop A reached 5,000 likes on Facebook.

POLITICAL STRATEGY

WHAT WAS THE OVERALL POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR THIS CAMPAIGN?

There were no high-level partisan contests on the ballot in April of 2010 and no other county-wide issues. Unlike the 2008 presidential election, low election turnout was therefore expected. In low-profile elections, the electorate has tended to be whiter and higher income, which means that voters are less inclined to support either transit or a tax increase.

The premise of the campaign's political strategy was that there are sufficient supporters of transit to win in an off-year election, but the challenge is how to turn them out without increasing turnout among opponents. As a result, the key strategy of the educational, political, and GOTV campaigns became to put all resources into mobilizing supportive voters without alerting opponents at the same time.

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

WHAT WERE THE MAIN COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF THIS CAMPAIGN?

Metro had a negative public image. In addition, since only about 3% of workers in the region use public transportation to get to work, in order to win, voters who do not use transit had to be convinced that they should care about the outcome of the proposition.

HOW WERE THESE CHALLENGES MET?

CMT's educational campaign set up a solid foundation for the political and GOTV campaigns that were to follow. The educational campaign intentionally shifted attention away from Metro and its perceived and real deficiencies to the broader need for public transit in general. None of the advertisements ever mentioned Metro or the proposition.

To convince voters who do not use transit, the educational campaign focused on the indirect benefits of transit demonstrating that everyone depends on people who ride transit. For example, the campaign's advertisements featured nurses. This approach helped to put a face on public transportation. The centerpiece of the campaign was the slogan: "Some of us ride it. All of us need it." The CMT educational campaign also identified transit champions, trusted faces who could deliver the pro-transit message.

Transit champions included civic leaders from a broad spectrum of the community, such as Washington University Chancellor Mark Wrighton, Chancellor of St. Louis Community College Zelema Harris, Pastor Tommie Pierson,

and Fredbird (mascot of the St. Louis Cardinals) and they were all featured in television advertisements declaring how public transportation benefits the people they serve and that they support transit. In addition to these television advertisements, the award-winning educational campaign included radio spots, billboards, advertisements on Metro, social media, the web, and direct mail.

HOW DID THE CAMPAIGN SPEND ITS COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES?

Consistent with the overall campaign strategy, all of the communications efforts were carefully targeted to reach only voters who most likely were supportive of Prop A. CMT selected cable television for its advertising to take advantage of the ability to select zip codes specific to the areas it wanted to target.

For example, South County which consists of largely white, German, older, and more conservative neighborhoods never saw any of the educational campaign's advertisements. On the other hand, North County, a predominantly African-American area with many transit riders, and St. Louis County's central corridor, which is known to have more liberal affluent, and frequent voters, saw a lot of the educational campaign's television and radio advertisements.

The political campaign also targeted its cable television advertising to zip codes that were served by light rail or had historically voted for transit taxes, while avoiding advertising in large swaths of the county with less supportive voters to avoid stirring up opposition among anti-tax groups. A later analysis of the campaign concluded that the directed media buys increased the turnout rate of infrequent voters in the zip codes targeted from 13% to 20%.

ORGANIZATION STRATEGY

HOW WERE CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS RECRUITED INTO THE CAMPAIGN?

Rose Windmiller, a long-time CMT board member and senior member of Mark Wrighton's staff, approached the Washington University Chancellor to see if he would be interested in co-chairing the political campaign's steering committee. Washington University relies heavily on transit; it has five MetroLink stations that serve the main and medical campuses and three bus routes that are specifically designed for the university community.

The university provides free Metro passes for all of its full-time students, benefits-eligible faculty and staff, and

full-time employees of qualified service providers who perform daily tasks on campus. Wrighton, who understands the importance of transit, agreed to take on the role. His willingness to chair the steering committee helped reassure other corporate stakeholders, particularly in the wake of the initial business opposition to Prop A. Wrighton took it upon himself to recruit the business community.

To this end, he held a dinner in October of 2009 in his home to which he invited individual business, labor, and community leaders to make a pitch to get them behind Vote Yes on A and he succeeded. Wrighton was successful in getting business leaders to join the campaign by picking them off one at a time.

Wrighton then asked one of them, Dr. Donald Suggs, publisher of the St. Louis American, the region's leading African American newspaper, to serve as co-chair of the campaign. Dr. Suggs agreed and invited a dozen of the leading African American clergy to meet with Prop A campaign leaders to discuss voter outreach. The clergy agreed to bring the proposition to the attention of their members and to lend their support and prestige to the campaign.

WHAT METHODS DID THE GOTV CAMPAIGN USE TO SECURE VOTERS?

Based on research that showed that face-to-face communication is more effective than mass media at stimulating voter participation, the Greater St. Louis Transit Alliance ran phone banks, conducted door to door outreach, delivered presentations, and held rallies. Hundreds of volunteers from unions and civic groups made the phone calls, hung leaflets on doors, spoke to voters at churches and in union halls.

The phone banking relied on lists of likely voters and concentrated its efforts on areas that had provided majorities for Prop M in 2008. The phone bank operation contacted almost 20,000 households with registered voters who were likely supporters of transit. The volunteers made sure to never contact households who disagreed with the ballot question twice. A later analysis of the campaign concluded that the phone banking boosted the turnout rate of infrequent voters but likely supporters from 19% to 29%.

In addition members of the coalition reached out directly to their constituents, for example, African American pastors incorporated Prop A into their sermons. The weekend before the vote, the campaign also hired constituents of the pastors to knock on doors of likely yes voters in North County to urge them to vote, as part of a so called "knock and drag" effort.

Liz Kramer, a Washington University graduate led a college campaign on a number of campuses. The students conducted T-shirt painting parties, organized transit flash mobs, baked cookies shaped like buses, and rapidly responded to any attacks on Prop A online or on talk radio.



KEY LESSONS

TARGETED TURNOUT STRATEGIES WORK

Putting initiatives up in low-visibility elections can succeed, if proponents focus on carefully turning out supporters, without mobilizing opponents. Turnout in the April 2010 election was higher than any April election in St. Louis County in more than ten years. The average turnout for the ten previous April elections was just under 105,000. Turnout in the April 2010 election was 151,613, 44% higher. Part of the reason such a strategy can be effective today, is that modern technologies enable campaigns to target much more precisely than was possible with earlier mass media. Coordination between the GOTV and media campaigns is also required.

A BROAD CIVIC COALITION IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN A PURE CHECKBOOK CAMPAIGN

Participants in the Prop A campaigns attribute their success in large part to the broad coalition that stretched across economic, racial, and civic divides, and included people who cared most about the issue. While the campaign depended on business involvement and large corporate contributions, the participants stress the importance of a true coalition, which included not just the usual suspects, and was led by a representative steering committee. The key for St. Louis was not only to invite a broad coalition to support the campaign that has already been formed, but to actually engage people in framing the reform agenda in the first place. One of the main differences between the failed Prop M attempt in 2008 and the success in 2010 was the combination and coordination of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

TARGETED MESSAGING IS KEY

A carefully crafted message that took into account which voters needed to be turned out proved to be a crucial ingredient in the campaign's recipe for success. CMT hired R&R Partners, with a proven track record in transit ballot initiatives, to develop the messaging that continued to set the tone throughout the campaign. Well-known transit champions were enlisted to deliver the message.

TAKE RISKS TO GET THE BALL ROLLING

CMT, under the longstanding leadership of Tom Shrout, made the risky decision to tackle the issue of raising revenue for Metro again in 2010, soon after the 2008 Prop M defeat. Against the advice of many, CMT not only pushed for putting the transit tax on the ballot again, but invested \$300,000 of the organization's endowment in the campaign. This investment helped attract others, including the original skeptics, to the ultimately successful campaign. This demonstrates that not all of the pieces of the campaign have to be in place when it gets started.

POTENTIALLY TRANSFERRABLE IDEAS

- Targeted cable advertisement buys
- Targeted GOTV outreach, such as hiring local church members to knock on doors
- Separation of the educational, political campaign, and GOTV campaigns
- The potential of attracting donations to, not just votes for, the campaign as a result of advertising
- Recruiting companies by showing employers what percentage of their employees rely on transit to get to work
- Use of well-known spokespeople as transit champions
- Involvement of students who can rapidly respond to negative comments online, social media or on talk radio
- Diverse and shared leadership