

McPherson Library Planned Carefully to Win Support for Building Program

by Steve Read, Director, McPherson Public Library

On August 1, 2006, McPherson voters approved, by a 71% margin, a ballot question authorizing a sales tax to fund a \$4.25 million renovation and expansion project for the public library. This project will double the size of the current facility. While the outcome of this election in McPherson was successful, the local political and economic landscape for each town and city is different. Did we employ any strategies here that might be useful to other communities? Here are a few to consider:

Start early – The library board began examining the future direction of the library and our facility over six years before the election. It was a long and winding road. If you wait until your library is experiencing serious overcrowding, you may have waited too long.

Assume nothing – While it was apparent that we were rapidly outgrowing our building, we approached the future from a long-range planning standpoint. Were we offering collections and services now that patrons were not using? What collections and services would patrons need in the future, and how much space would they require?

Involve the community – We created several focus groups comprised of citizens early in the process and periodically reconvened them to update them on the status of the plans. They appreciated it, and we appreciated their assistance when we went into the campaign.

Distill your needs – As a result of our planning process, we selected seven critical needs which served as a basis for determining how much space we required in the future and how it should be configured. With taxpayer dollars involved, we asked not, “What do we want?” but “What do we need?”

Secure the key to the city – While library patrons were enthusiastic about the project from the start, the gatekeepers of the ballot are the city commissioners. We included them in the process, meeting with them at regular intervals. Our mayor, an ex-officio member of the library board, acted as a liaison with city hall in deciding an election date and funding mechanism.

Sell the need, not the dream – Every organization in every town has a dream, and, in most cases, a costly one. We resisted the temptation to gush about how great the new building would be and concentrated on the critical needs and what the consequences would be to the community if we had to continue future operations with no additional space.

Excellence is the best PR – Like many libraries, we have established a reputation over the years of providing nothing less than superior service for our patrons, and thus were viewed very favorably by our community. Patrons will hesitate to invest their tax dollars in an institution which fails them or whom they perceive as being a bad steward of public funds.

Don't trip at the finish line – It is easy to believe that library supporters will have the election date circled in red on their calendars, but voter apathy is notorious. We pushed advance voting from the start. Before Election Day, we made phone calls to supporters, and patron volunteers put out signs to get the vote out.

When it comes to building projects, there is no stock formula for success. But hopefully, some of the strategies we employed will help increase your odds of success as well.