

Redoing a Referendum to Succeed

Durand-Arkansaw School District refocuses communication efforts to pass referendum

SESSION *Going to Referendum? What We Learned the Second Time*

Presenters Durand-Arkansaw: Greg Doverspike, superintendent; SDS Architects, Inc.: Laura Eysnogle, interior designer; Tom Twohig, principal architect; Market & Johnson, Inc.: Jason Plante, vice president; Baird Public Finance: Lisa Voisin, director

Unable to financially support three buildings, officials in the small Durand-Arkansaw School District knew they had to do something. And after their first attempt — a \$19 million building plan in two questions — was defeated by voters, they knew they had to do something else.

So they did. A second, smaller building plan at \$13.48 million with a single question was approved by voters a year later.

“There’s no real blueprint for how to pass a referendum,” Durand-Arkansaw District Administrator Greg Doverspike said. “Every district is different and you have to find what applies to your district.”

The process started in 2013 when the school board began thinking about commissioning a facility study to review the district’s building needs. The district, which was the result of a consolidation in the 1990s, had two elementary schools and a combined middle school/high school building.

The study was finished in 2014 and results sent to an ad hoc community committee made up of 20 people from “all walks of life.” The committee considered options produced from the study by outside experts and rated them according to priorities set by the committee.

The group developed the first building plan, which included \$17.5 million to remodel the middle school/high school building and maintain both elementary schools plus another \$1.5 million for improvements to district athletic fields.

Because they were so confident of a victory, a yes committee was never created. The district had a series of four community hearings with presentations about the plan and building tours. Each session lasted three hours and only drew a handful of people. The referendum failed.

The second time around, school officials reduced the size of the building plan by permanently closing one of the elementary schools and dropping improvements to the athletic fields.

They also made major changes to their communication strategy. Instead of holding community hearings, district representatives spoke to civic groups.

They formed a yes committee and also got help from retired staff members and recent high school graduates who used social media.

Instead of presenting all the information all at once, they decided to present smaller chunks of information under a single theme on a weekly basis. A flier with the week’s theme



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— Greg Doverspike,
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Administrator

went home in students’ backpacks and Doverspike wrote a weekly article for the local newspaper on the same theme. The fliers were placed at local gathering places around the community and sent to rural post office boxes.

Another key to the referendum’s success was the decision to communicate clearly what would happen if the referendum did not pass. The board voted on a list of cuts, which included cutting middle school sports, and made it clear that the elementary school would be closed even if the vote failed.

Lisa Voisin, a director with Baird Public Finance, helped the district with the referendum. She said board members and other school officials needed to understand the tax impact of the referendum, including the timing and the fact that the debt levy is separate from the operations levy. Even if state aid changes, a district going to referendum should stick with a conservative and consistent number to avoid voter confusion, she said. ■