

REFERENDUM SUCCESS:

Right Solution, Right Time, Right Message

SESSION: *Referendum Success: Getting it Right for the Short-Term and the Long-Term*

Presenters: Perry Hibner, community relations-education foundation specialist, Donald Johnson, district administrator, Annette Ashley, board clerk, Tom Wohlleber, assistant superintendent, Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District; Christin Mlsna, communications specialist, J.H. Findorff & Son, Inc.; Joe Donovan, communications consultant, The Donovan Group; Matthew Wolfert, principal, Bray Associates Architects, Inc.

After two failed referendums in the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District, the school board brought forward a sizeable \$59.8 million operational referendum in 2012. Undaunted by the hefty price tag, the board worked diligently with community partners, steadfastly maintaining the proposal was the right solution for the community. In the November election, the referendum passed with an overwhelming 68 percent. Luck? Happenstance? No, just thoughtful determination.

“There’s one way to pass a referendum,” said Perry Hibner, communications specialist for the district. “The right solution, at the right time, with the right message.”

Hibner noted that after the failed referenda, the board took the time to analyze why the previous campaigns faltered, using focus groups, surveys and long-range planning discussions.

Assistant Superintendent Tom Wohlleber implored, “Keep the message simple.” He said the district routinely communicated about different options examined (over 20 were considered) and made a concerted

effort to engage diverse opinions about the schools’ future. “You want people with divergent viewpoints,” he said, adding that architects and engineers approach problems differently and that’s useful.

Hibner emphasized the importance of communicating with and involving *all* stakeholders — staff, students, parents, the school board and the community.

“Don’t expect people to come to you,” Hibner said about educating the community. “You have to go out to the community.”

Hibner said over 300 presentations were made in the community — 150 by himself and District Administrator Don Johnson. Hibner added that it’s important to tailor your comments to the group you’re speaking with. “Make sure your message is unique to the group you’re talking to. Explain how the referendum will benefit them.”

Christin Mlsna, a consultant with J.H. Findorff & Son, Inc. who worked with the district during the referendum, summed up the goal succinctly, “You have to tell stories to your community to help them



Perry Hibner of the Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District, shares how the district successfully passed a \$59.8 million referendum in 2012.

understand why this is the right solution.”

School board member Annette Ashley urged advocates “to stay focused on the referendum.

“Remind people of the process — how the board met regularly over the course of a year to engage the community,” Ashley said. She also urged the audience to discuss the ramifications of a failed referendum.

“Be sure to discuss as a board what the course of action will be if the referendum fails,” she said. “You have to be clear with people about what will happen.”

Communications professional Joe Donovan, another member of the referendum team, explained that involving everyone in the school-community is invaluable; noting a custodian who worked for the district for 48 years became an important spokesperson because the custodian had intimate knowledge of the buildings’ conditions.

“Communication is just about telling a story,” Donovan said. ■

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Explain how the referendum will benefit them.”**

— Perry Hibner, communications specialist, Middleton-Cross Plains Area School District