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Ronnie Budge
Jackson County Library

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Jackson County Serial Levies

by *Ronnie Budge*

Director

Jackson County Library

Four serial levy elections for improved library services. Four times the Jackson County Library "beat the odds" and overcame voter reluctance to increase local property taxes.

On each occasion, it was public involvement, i.e. grassroots support, that made the difference — not paid professional PR people, not library staff, and not big dollars.

The very first election campaign in 1984 was planned by a group of amateurs who had never done such a thing before. They established a few principles:

Run a positive campaign. Talk about the good things the library does. Talk about the better things the library could do with more funding. Don't talk about how bad things will be if the measure fails. Don't even plan for what will happen if it fails.

Keep things simple. Don't talk dollars, talk services. Tell people what they want to hear (but never lie). Get out the yes vote and ignore the no vote.

Make it apparent that everyone's friends and neighbors are voting yes.

Probably the levy would have passed that first time even without a real campaign. The library's funding had been cut drastically two years before. The book budget was almost nonexistent. With the equivalent of only 13 paid employees operating 14 branches, most branches were open only 10 hours a week, and service was limited to checking books in and out.

Volunteers and Friends of the Library organizations made it possible even to provide this minimal level of service. Volunteers and Friends also got the first serial levy passed. They told the voters that volunteers and bake sales are fine, but they are not enough. It takes paid, trained staff to run a library, and it takes tax dollars to pay the telephone and electric bills. The voters believed the volunteers and Friends in a way that they may not have believed the library director.

In each election, community residents with personal experience of these services were asked to help get out the yes vote. Many provided testimonials, which were turned into newspaper and radio ads. Others

wrote letters to the editor. They all eagerly put up lawn signs.

Library Advisory Committee members (what other libraries call *trustees*) and Friends board members formed the core of each election planning committee. Having active and committed people already involved with the library through these organizations "jump-started" every campaign.

The most recent campaign occupied the summer of 1996, from July 4 to Labor Day. It was chaired by a Library Advisory Committee member who was a school teacher on his summer "vacation." He encouraged the Friends of the Library in each branch to "do their own thing" to pass the library serial levy in their community. Some chose to run ads in local papers. Others walked in parades or handed out brochures in front of the local market. Again, the existence of these Friends groups (even though most are very small) made it easier to get the campaign going.

Thirteen years and four elections later, library service in Jackson County has grown dramatically. A computer catalog and circulation system links the now 15 branches, courier vans go to each facility daily, librarians provide high quality reference services from four regional centers (assisted by CD-ROM and Internet resources not dreamed of 13 years ago), outreach staff deliver materials to the homebound and to child day care centers, and youth services librarians give book talks in schools, bringing more eager readers to the public library.

Four serial levies, even successful ones, took a toll on the library, however. The campaigns (and instability of funding) diverted attention from other planning issues, such as capital expansion needs. Because the Jackson County Library was totally dependent on levy funding, each time it faced total closure if the measures did not pass. Employees were on an emotional roller coaster every three to five years.

Ironically, Measures 47 and 50, which hurt many public libraries in Oregon, turned the Jackson County Library's serial levy into a permanent property tax. We do not anticipate going to the voters for another serial levy anytime soon. (Although if luck holds, we may be seeking bond approval for capital needs.)

Simultaneously, however, Measure 50 made the property tax part of the county's general fund, not necessarily dedicated to library service. For 13 years, we went directly "to the people" for library funding. We are now back to the more typical situation of being one department among many seeking approval for an adequate operating budget from governing officials.

But even now, we know that public support is vital. To earn that support, we must continue to provide outstanding service and build our library's reputation among the people who pay the bills. 