Building Bond Support

Proposals require work long before the election

Educating voters

Long before the first shovel strikes the ground on a bond project, school districts are realizing they need to put more effort into educating voters about why a bond is needed, what it will do for students, and how much it will cost. In some cases, districts must work extra hard to win over voters. Clear, consistent, and constant communication is important to winning support for these proposals. Fort Stockton ISD’s stepped-up efforts paid off. With more than twice the number of voters making it to the polls in November than in the spring election, both district propositions on the ballot passed. You have to reach out to all the members of the community,” said Dax Rodriguez, division director of TASSB’s Governmental Relations. “Generally, I see bonds fail due to a lack of communication, and when they pass it’s because districts did a good job of communicating exactly what they are going to do and how that will impact the educational success of the students.” Fort Stockton ISD, a small district in the Pecos County seat in far West Texas, consulted attorneys before setting out to educate the community about the bond proposal. The district also developed a webpage with videos and a flowchart that clearly outlined that the bond would not increase the property tax rate.

“You need something that in three seconds people can understand because we only have three seconds,” Zamora said, referring to explaining bond information to the community. Zamora said a small group of residents “fought tooth and nail that nothing that we can do is right.” He countered their efforts on multiple fronts, holding educational assemblies and giving numerous interviews to local media about what the bond proposals would do for the district and how a “no” vote would not lower the tax rate. When the $60 million bond overwhelmingly passed, Zamora said, “Our community has become one.”

Ballot language

School districts large and small depend on bond packages to fund capital projects such as building new schools, renovating existing buildings, improving technology, and creating performing arts and athletic facilities. This voter-dependent way of funding major educational improvements can be complicated and sometimes fraught with conflict for local communities. National School Public Relations Association President Cathy Kedjidjian commented in the Texas School Public Relations Association’s newsletter about how hard Texas school districts had to fight negative communication. “You faced opposition unlike any previous ‘Vote No’ campaigns your community has seen,” she wrote about the November bond elections.

Not too far from Fort Stockton in the same corner of West Texas, Canutillo ISD did not pass its proposed bonds in the last two November elections. “The results of the bond election are disappointing because they point to a lack of willingness from our community to invest in the future of our students,” longtime Canutillo ISD Trustee and TASSB President-Elect Armando Rodriguez said in an interview with KBDC El Paso.

Canutillo ISD, which serves more than 5,000 students in a region bordering New Mexico, had a $264 million bond on the recent ballot that addressed district needs in the areas of district growth and equity, and supporting special programs like STEAM classes. “The bond proposal sought to address the dire needs in the district,” said Rodriguez. Canutillo ISD’s bond would have raised the property tax rate as much as three cents over the life of the bond but would not have impacted senior citizens.

While not all bond proposals will raise taxes, a recent state law requires school districts to add a sentence to every bond proposition stating, “THIS IS A PROPERTY TAX INCREASE.”

“Unfortunately, new state regulations to ballot language forcing districts to label any referendum as a tax increase even if mathematically it isn’t one, will make the option of bond funding very difficult for school districts to use,” Rodriguez said.

Fort Stockton ISD Superintendent Gabriel Zamora (dressed in suit and blue tie) as they mobilize on Election Day. A local restaurant, Joe’s Place, served as Election Day headquarters. Photo courtesy of Fort Stockton ISD

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Rodriguez said the board is in the process of regrouping. “We recognize the need to address some of the concerns that are prevalent in our community,” he said.

Other obstacles
But opposition to a tax rate increase isn’t the only thing discouraging voter support. Other districts, such as Gregory-Portland ISD on the coast near Corpus Christi, didn’t have a tax rate increase connected with its $242 million bond proposal, but it didn’t get approved in November. New state regulations concerning bonds, inflation, and an increase in mistrust of public education since the onset of the pandemic can make it difficult for bonds to win voter approval.

Prior to 2020, about 70% of school bonds passed, González said. According to a review of Texas Bond Review Board Data, 57% of the school bond ballot propositions passed in November. Another recent legislative requirement is that bond requests related to athletic and performing arts facilities fail at a greater rate,” said Lockhart ISD Superintendent Mark Estrada. “In the interest of transparency, the district chose to educate the community about the reality of the need for additional bonds in the future so they understood that the growth much extracurricular activities improve the academic performance of students. There are so many positives for being part of those activities and those facilities create spaces to bring the community together.”

Clear messaging
González stresses that both the district and its school board need to have a clear and concerted message that is consistently communicated to stakeholders.

Lockhart ISD took a long-term, phased-in approach to the bond initiatives it proposed to address district immense growth in the Lockhart area south of Austin.

“The school board and district leaders wanted to present a bond that would address the most urgent needs,” said Lockhart ISD Superintendent Mark Estrada. “In the interest of transparency, the district chose to educate the community about the reality of the need for additional bonds in the future so they understood that the growth plan would occur over time.”

Lockhart ISD used the approach Gonzalez recommends for all districts that are trying to educate the community about a bond proposal. “They need to make sure they are reaching out to the members of the community who aren’t (just) parents.” He stresses that a wide variety of communication channels should be used. “You aren’t going to reach those people through the district newsletter or website,” González said.

Bond information signs at each campus and a mailout to all voters in the district were just a couple of the information channels Lockhart ISD used to build community support.

“In this digital age, it was important to use tools beyond the bond brochure,” said Estrada. The district developed a toolkit of digital infographics and informational videos for social media that addressed concerns that came up during a series of meetings between community members, district leadership and the board.

“These meetings were smaller with diverse groups to try to harness the community’s collective voice, and their feedback directly shaped the information tools the district developed for the bond once the board called for the bond election,” he said.

Estrada also credits Lockhart ISD’s successful $71 million bond election in November to voter-turnout efforts. “The district had one message stream devoted to voter participation with its #ShowUpLockhart campaign,” he said, noting that 56% of eligible voters participated in the November election versus 50% in the unsuccessful 2019 bond election.

“How do you communicate about voter registration and participation. Make this a district priority even when you are not having elections to create a culture of voting,” Estrada said.

“Clear messaging around bonds for athletic and performing arts facilities needs to show a link between academics and the benefits of a theater program or a natatorium for the swim team, he explained. “If you’re going to go after a bond for an extracurricular facility, you really want to push how

Bond Strategies from Corpus Christi ISD
Corpus Christi ISD Superintendent Roland Hernandez knows a few things about passing bonds. Over the last 10 years, his district has passed five bonds. “It comes down to communication and voter communication,” he said. Here are a few strategies Corpus Christi ISD has used:

- Flyers and pamphlets with bond information were distributed throughout the city.
- Bond FAQs posted on the district website and a video presentation detailed what the district had accomplished with previous bond elections and what was still owed.
- District administrative team and campus principals presented bond information to each PTA.
- Student ambassadors educated peers and community members about the bond.
- Bond presentations were given to over 60 different groups throughout the city.
- Established a team effort with board members giving full support to the proposed bond.
- When determining specifics of a bond proposal, focus on the district’s needs. “I see a lot of bond packages that come across as more of a want, and I think communities and voters put us on that really fast,” Hernandez said.

Beth Griemser is a staff writer for Texas Lone Star.