

How To Create A Children's Services Council

Children's Services Councils are one of the most innovative approaches a community can take to meeting the needs of its children and families. These councils enable counties to plan, coordinate, fund and evaluate services for children. Florida law enables counties to seek local voter approval (through referendum) to create Children's Services Councils and gain taxing authority. There are now 16 Children's Services Councils in Florida; eight with taxing authority (known as independent districts); the others are dependent upon allocations from the general budgets of local government to fund services for children. The eight independent districts are in Hillsborough, Pinellas, Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee, Miami-Dade, and Broward counties. The Palm Beach County case study explains how one county organized to create its council and 14 years later organized again to double the local millage rate.

Introduction

The Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County is a special district of local government established by the Florida legislature in 1986 and empowered by the voters of the county to levy local property taxes to help our children reach their full potential.

As set by Florida statute, the Council is comprised of 10 members - five appointed by the governor to four-year terms, and five ex-officio (appointed by virtue of their office or position), including the superintendent of schools, a juvenile court judge, the district administrator of the Department of Children and Families, a school board member and a county commissioner.

Special taxing districts are a Florida phenomenon. The Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County has become an innovative leader, pioneering new methods of serving children and families, attracting national foundation and federal grants and matching state and federal dollars to assure that Palm Beach County gets its fair share returned to our community.

This case study provides information on how Palm Beach created support for and passed the 1986 referendum that created the Children's Services Council and the subsequent referendum in 2000 that increased the allowable millage for the Council's activities from .50 to 1.0 (from 50 cents per \$1,000 of taxable property value to one dollar per \$1,000). Hopefully this information will assist other counties who want to establish Children's Services Councils to support children and families in their communities

Activities Pursued to Create the Children's Services Council

Leadership

The first step in creating the special taxing district and the Children's Services Council in 1986 was to establish a leadership group to guide the effort. Palm Beach County had a Child Advocacy Board that assumed this role. This Board solicited the support of Senator Harry A. Johnston II, a strong child advocate and the then President of the Florida Senate, and Senator Eleanor Weinstock, an equally strong child advocate. The Child Advocacy Board was established by Palm Beach County as a volunteer board of interested citizens to advise them on the needs of the county's children. The board meets monthly with a county employee as its director. This Board created the various committees who were involved in the effort from beginning to end.

Authorizing Legislation

In Florida, counties cannot create special taxing districts without being authorized to do so by state law. Senators Johnston and Weinstock led the effort in the Legislature to pass authorizing legislation that would give Palm Beach County the ability to create, by citizen referendum, a special taxing district to fund a Children's Services Council and services for children and families. The proposed legislation was based on a similar initiative that created the Juvenile Welfare Board in Pinellas County, 40 years earlier. The group defied all odds and astonished even Johnston when the bill was passed by the Legislature with only one dissenting vote.

Passage of authorizing legislation was only the first step. Creating a special taxing district dedicated to funding services for children required a majority vote of the citizens of Palm Beach County. To accomplish this feat, the Child Advocacy Board designed the referendum and organized a voter education campaign just like a political campaign. Only instead of a single candidate, they had children.

Political Action Committee

The Board created a Political Action Committee following the advice of the Supervisor of Elections on state and local regulations related to establishing and running a Political Action Committee. The potential members were urged to read over Chapter 106, Florida Statutes and the State of Florida Handbook for Committees. The Supervisor of Elections indicated to the Committee that they had to file not only the papers to form a political action committee, but would be responsible for filing their treasurer reports once the committee had appointed a campaign treasurer and designated a campaign depository for the political committee. These activities were accomplished and the campaign was begun.

Community Support

The first activity of the Political Action Committee was to build support for the idea among community leaders. Leaders in the county from business, politics, local government, civic organizations, education, the faith community and the media were sought out to get their input and buy-in prior to announcing the referendum to the general public. These groups then helped with obtaining individual and organizational endorsements for passage of the referendum.

A local attorney wrote an endorsement letter for the referendum that described the importance of voting YES. He explained in the letter that the extra tax would provide millions of dollars in new revenue to assist Palm Beach County's youngsters in need of child care, drug treatment programs, day care for indigent families, health care for low income families, assistance for emotionally handicapped children, programs to reduce the high school drop out rate, and much more.

A letter was also sent from key committee members to the members of the Palm Beach County Bar Association explaining why it was important to support the referendum. This letter created the Children's Services Council's campaign slogan: "Protect our future; protect our children; protect your investment in Palm Beach County by voting Yes for the Children's Services Council Referendum."

As a result of these efforts, the following organizations, entities, and/or individuals endorsed the referendum to establish a Children's Services Council in Palm Beach County:

Florida Senate President
Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches
Executive Women of the Palm Beaches
Junior League of the Palm Beaches
Palm Beach Junior College
Southern Bell Phone Company
Juvenile Judge
School Principal
WPEC-TV Channel 12 & Channel 5
Palm Beach Post
Juvenile Division State Attorneys
City / Town Mayors
Palm Beach County School Superintendent
Palm Beach County Bar Associates
City Council Members
Classroom Teachers Association
Private Foundations
Crime Prevention Council
Florida Center for Children and Youth

Child Advocacy Board of Palm Beach
Florida Center for Children & Youth
Ft. Lauderdale Sun Sentinel
Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County
Palm Beach County Commissioner
Local Palm Beach Attorneys
Economic Council
Leadership Executive Women
Century Village Democratic Club
CROS Urban Ministry
South County Political Cooperative
NCNB Bank
United Way of the Palm Beaches
Department of Children and Families, District IX
Pratt & Whitney Inc.
Former Senate President
Community Council
Florida Atlantic University
City Commissioners
Palm Beach County Health Department
Consulting Engineers and Architects
Governor's Constituency for Children
League of Women Voters statewide
Crime Prevention Council of Palm Beach
Juvenile Association of Palm Beach County
St. Petersburg Times

Voter Education

The next step was to create a voter education strategy involving advertising and the media. An Advertising Committee was created, directed by the Advertising Co-chair for WPEC-TV. Characteristics and activities of this committee were:

- The size of the Advertising Committee was limited so that people could work easily together and be better able to come to a quick consensus on creative approaches to communicating the message.
- The Committee reviewed the ballot language to make sure that it was written in clear and simple terms that properly expressed the issue, yet still met legal requirements. This step allowed the committee to express the intention of the referendum in language that would appeal to voters. This language had to be cleared by the Supervisor of Elections before it could be used.
- The Committee then recruited a highly creative individual from the advertising community to work on a pro-bono basis. It was significant that this individual was not a part of the 'traditional agency mainstream' who normally works on political issues; rather he was

selected based on his creativity and interest in supporting the campaign. His contribution was to create the mailings and printed materials that promoted the referendum throughout the County.

- The Committee then used volunteers to conduct surveys at key locations, to poll and randomly sample community awareness and voter preference on the issue, and to obtain detailed comments and perceptions about the issue. This research was very helpful in developing a creative approach to marketing the idea to the general public.
- Because of the short time frame needed to communicate the campaign message to a large number of people, the Committee decided to use television as the primary medium. A 30-second spot featured respected people in the community from various walks of life who delivered a strong testimonial about community needs that could be impacted by the passage of this referendum. They were scheduled primarily during news and morning show blocks for the four days prior to the election.
- In addition to the TV campaign, the committee printed a simple flyer featuring a striking graphic using the campaign's slogan and restating the needs expressed in the TV commercial. These flyers were distributed at community drops, speaking engagements and selected mailings. A small number of buttons with the campaign logo were distributed to key volunteers willing to wear them at high attendance events.
- In addition to TV spots, radio and print media broadcast public service announcements on children's issues and the need for the referendum.
- The committee also organized and supported grassroots advocacy by parents by providing materials supporting the referendum that they could use in one-on-one and small group discussions.

The work of the Advertising Committee was amplified by a variety of voter education activities including:

- The Political Action Committee prepared 'Questions and Answers' fact sheets that addressed issues consistently raised by the public. These fact sheets provided information about what the money would be used for, how services would be provided and how accountability would be achieved. Simple facts and figures on the needs of children and families in Palm Beach County were presented, along with information on how funds would be allocated and the mechanisms for overseeing the funding. The topics covered in the fact sheets included:
 - Demographics related to children in Palm Beach County
 - Accountability procedures
 - Administrative costs

- The actual language of the proposed Children’s Services Council referendum
 - Members of the Political Action Committee
 - How competition with existing agencies would be avoided
 - Effect on taxpayers
 - Funding
 - Needs assessment
 - Types of programs to be funded
- The Committee formed a speaker’s bureau to provide targeted and interested groups with information regarding the referendum. Each speaker had copies of the questions/answers fact sheet and the referendum as it was to appear on the ballot. Speeches were tailored to the group being addressed, i.e., one for speaking to human service groups and another for private sector and political groups. Most speakers received issue training before speaking.
 - Letters were sent to targeted groups just prior to the last month of the campaign requesting the opportunity to speak to their groups. Service clubs, chambers of commerce, and political groups were among those targeted. A master calendar of speaking requests was maintained as well as a list of speakers. Key speeches and media interviews were made by the campaign chairpersons to assure consistency.
 - The Palm Beach County Superintendent of Schools hosted a forum that identified how the local school system could assist in passing the referendum by educating school employees on the benefits of such a council, and expressing support publicly for the referendum

Fundraising

The Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches led the fund-raising effort. Less than \$30,000 was spent on the campaign, which was mainly a grassroots effort. Members of the Child Advocacy Board and others, including Elaine Webb Alvarez, child advocate; Ken Spillias, attorney and former county commissioner; and Barry Berg, accountant, and child advocate led the fundraising effort.

Result

The 1986 referendum was put on the ballot just months after state-authorizing legislation was passed. Businesses, media, social services and the public supported it. The referendum was approved in every precinct in the county, passing by a 70-30 margin in the general election. As set by state statute, it allowed the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County to tax its property owners up to one-half mill (50 cents per \$1,000 of taxable property value).

2000 Campaign

In November 2000, Palm Beach County realized that the 1986 millage rate for the Children's Services Council (hereafter referred to as "the Council") and its work was not sufficient to meet the needs of its children in a growing and increasingly complex community. This time the Council directed the campaign asking the voters to increase the special children's tax base from a half mill to a full mill. No change in state law was required before the County could seek an increase in the millage rate. Approximately \$30,000 was spent on this campaign using funds from the Council's budget. Most of the campaign expenditures were for direct mailings, and last minute television spots with former senator Harry Johnston II bringing the message.

Community volunteers were again very instrumental in getting out the message and building support. These volunteers and Council staff directed the voter education campaign. Because the Council had 14 years of experience under its belt, it was able to provide much more information about needs, services and outcomes than was possible in the 1986 campaign. The voter education campaign addressed the following issues:

- What 'at risk' means
- Common indicators used to determine if a child is at risk
- How additional funding would be used:
 - 50% Early Childhood
 - 25% After School/Holiday & Summer Care for Elementary Children
 - 25% Family Strengthening / Child Abuse Prevention

The Council produced attractive educational materials that explained program successes in a variety of areas such as reducing infant mortality and improving school readiness. The Council also explained how it monitored programs, insured accountability, and controlled administrative costs. And, the Council responded openly and quickly to public requests for information.

The Council met with editorial boards of top newspapers. Senator Johnston attended these meetings to support the Council. These meetings generated enthusiastic support as the following headlines in the Palm Beach Post and the Sun-Sentinel of South Florida illustrate:

- "Children's Services Council Deserves Funding Increase"
- "Say YES to Higher Taxing Authority: District Has Had an Impact in County"
- "Tax Increase May Give Parents Break"
- "Tax Increase May Help Ease Parents' Child-Care Budget"

Members of the Council and two staff members—the CEO and the Public Information Director—became the speaker's bureau. A political consultant was hired to do the mailings and organize the grassroots effort. Much of the

information was directed at political groups and condominium groups in strategic areas, but a major push was also made to seek out the business community. All of the agencies and organizations that endorsed the effort in 1986 also supported the 2000 campaign with the additional support of the Economic Council of Palm Beach County.

'Referendum Breakfasts' were held to speak on the importance of continuing to support the Council. The Executive Director and Council members identified the difference the Council has made in Palm Beach County, emphasizing that the Council's investments have proven to be factors in preventing many of the serious problems that affect a child's successful entry into adulthood. At the same time the Council pointed out the need for additional funding because:

- The number of children in Palm Beach County had increased by more than 50,000 during the 90's, from 188,000 in 1990 to almost 240,000 in 1999.
- More than 10,000 children were still in need of childcare and after-school care.
- The number of verified child abuse and neglect cases in Palm Beach County had increased by 24% in the past five years.

Result

The 2000 referendum passed by a 68-32 margin — a major success in a time with a completely different political climate than in 1986 when the first millage rate was passed.

Conclusion

In the words of Senator Harry A. Johnston II, "We as legislators are always looking at the next election instead of the next century. We are shortsighted if we do not take care of our children. It costs the state of Florida more to feed and house a prisoner for one year than it would cost to send him to Harvard Medical School. If I were advising my fellow legislators around the country, I would say: '*If you want to leave a legacy in your very short time in office, then you must begin to fund children's services.*' "

Lessons Learned

1. Build Broad-based Community Support:

No organized opposition arose during the campaigns for either referendum. This was largely due to the successful effort to obtain endorsements from a broad spectrum of interest groups, public or private, before introducing the issue to the public.

2. Have a Respected Champion Lead the Effort:

Senator Johnston was a very effective champion for both campaigns. He was a highly respected politician, known for his integrity, and as a consistent advocate for children. He was not perceived as having any self-interest related to the outcome other than the gratification received from establishing good public policy.

3. Have Data to Support the Need for a Council and Special Funding:

Potential opposition was stilled because the advocates for the referendum stuck with data and indisputable facts about the needs of children, the benefits of providing prevention programs and the accountability maintained by the Council over its use of taxpayers' money.

4. Pay Attention to Timing:

The voter education effort in both campaigns was close to the election. This kept the issue alive in the minds of voters, but did not provide time for a counter campaign to organize.

5. Have Good Educational Materials:

In both campaigns, educational materials were prepared for a variety of audiences and venues. These materials were attractive, crisp, focused and understandable.

6. Work with the Media:

Print and broadcast media were very supportive throughout the campaigns. This also dampened any latent opposition and raised the consciousness of the community.

7. Be Honest with the Voters:

Though it may be possible to sneak a referendum by voters by having the vote scheduled for a primary or some other election with historically low voter turnout, this will backfire in future elections or in efforts to increase

funding. Both of these campaigns were conducted for general elections with major voter turnout.

8. Involve All Potential Voters:

Special voter education mailings were sent to registered absentee voters to be sure they understood the issue and to solicit their support.

9. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare:

Though the formal campaigns were relatively short, the supporters of the concept did their homework. Materials were field tested before they were released, speakers were recruited and educated, fact sheets were developed, voter opinion surveys were conducted, and legal regulations were identified and followed.

EXHIBITS

LEGISLATION