

# **Recipe for Success: How one community passed its tax election**

## **Introduction:**

### **Our committee:**

- **Barbara Mordo: Co-Coordinator**, former kindergarten teacher, Foothill Commissioner for the Foothill/De Anza Foundation, and school volunteer
- **Nancy Tucker: Co-Coordinator**, former school librarian, and Los Altos Library Commissioner
- **Elayne Dauber**: former Los Altos Hills mayor, former JPA (Joint Powers Authority) Board member, and former Library Commissioner
- **Pat Frischmann**: Public Relations professional and League of Women Voters member
- **Pat Johnson**: Los Altos Friends of the Library member
- **Donna Poulos**: former Friends of Deer Hollow Farm Board Member and Deer Hollow Farm volunteer
- **Lenelle Smith**: current Los Altos Library Commissioner and member of Los Altos Library Endowment Board; former VP, ad agency

Our ad-hoc committee of seven built on what others had done the year previously (2004), where the campaign to pass a new parcel tax, although successful in Los Altos (71%) /Los Altos Hills (67%), failed system wide.

Advised by savvy former library commissioners who worked the 2004 and previous campaigns, we chose a strategy that we could carry out with a small coordinating committee of seven and with community members we could involve. Library staff also contributed time. We were very successful, passing Measure A in Los Altos by 83 percent and in Los Altos Hills by 81 percent. Measure B, which would have increased library funding passed by 76 percent in Los Altos and 74 percent in Los Altos Hills.

### **Our Communities: Los Altos/Los Altos Hills:**

Located 40 miles south of San Francisco, these two communities are the hometowns to hundreds of Silicon Valley business owners, executives, managers and engineers. The two towns have a combined population of 37,000, as of the 2000 census. Los Altos residents, 25 years and older, are well-educated: 70 percent have a Bachelor's or Master's degree. Similarly, 78.1 percent of Los Altos Hills residents, 25 years or older have either a Bachelor's or Master's degree. The annual per capita library circulation for these communities is 44, the highest of any of the system libraries. Geographically speaking, both communities are compact: Los Altos has a land area of 6.35 miles and Los Altos Hills has a land area of 8.62 miles.

### **Our Timeline**

#### **Pre-election: Mid-February to April 2, the beginning of the Voting Period**

- Raise Money: Mailed letters to library supporters in Los Altos/Los Altos Hills
- Obtain endorsements
- Help paid election staffers prepare campaign literature with endorsements and community photos

#### **Pre-election phoning: March 21 – April 2**

- Create yard sign/flyer and reproduce
- Create Walkathon handout materials
- Organize Walkathon
- Organize Phone banks
- Create Email messages
- Write many individual emails coordinating activities throughout the entire voting period
- Send pre-voting email message to individuals who could then forward the message to others
- Print Publicity: San Jose Mercury News Story, March 24, and editorial, March 29

#### **Voting Period: April 5 through May 3**

**Los Altos/Los Altos Hills Voters received their mail-in ballots on approximately Tuesday and Wednesday, April 5 or 6.**

**Place Yard Signs: April 1 -- 8**

Print Publicity:

- Town Crier (Local weekly newspaper mailed to community residents)
- Front Page story and editorial: Wednesday, April 6.
- Talon: Los Altos High School newspaper, April 1
- Friends of the Library newsletter
- PTA newsletter: Almond Word

Email campaign message went out

**Walkathon or Precinct Walk: April 9**

- Phonathon following Walkathon: **April 12, 14 (major phoning); April 21, 25, and 26** (less extensive phoning) through the courtesy of local real estate offices. Other volunteers phoned from home.
- Posted material to campaign website: List of activities, flyer, and Talon news story

**Election Night, May 3:**

- Get-together organized by Cheryl Houts, Community Librarian, in the program room at the Los Altos Library Program room to celebrate with chocolate cake, coffee, and the results, which were available at about 9 p.m.

## **Our Activities: Details**

**Introduction:** All our activities had publicity value since we were communicating with and involving the community.

**1. Fundraising:** Sent fund raising letters to 500, raising approximately \$8,000. Lead: Barbara Mordo

**2. Gathered endorsements from**

- Los Altos Elementary School Board (Nancy)
- Mountain View Los Altos School Board (Nancy)
- PTA Council (Nancy)
- Almond School PTA (Nancy and Teresa Kersten)
- Covington School PTA (Nancy and Rebecca Coleman)
- Los Altos Chamber of Commerce (Barbara)
- Los Altos City Council (Curtis Cole)
- Los Altos Hills City Council (Jean Mordo)
- Mayor David Casas (Nancy)
- Rotary Club (Jean Mordo)
- Wanny Hersey, Principal, Bullis Charter School (Barbara)
- Richard Fischer, MVLA Union High School District Superintendent (Nancy)
- Marge Gratiot, Los Altos Elementary School District Superintendent (Nancy)
- Emily Cheng, former Mayor of Los Altos Hills (Barbara)
- And many others who said "Use my name on their donation."

**3. Pre-election phoning to identify and inform supporters.** Barbara recruited about 22, who phoned from home. However, there were not enough recruited to cover both communities. The pre-election phoning that we did was successful because we were explaining an issue to voters that they cared about and we were explaining a new voting method, the mail-in ballot. Many thanked us for phoning. A reasonable estimate of names for one person to phone would be 50 to 100 names, an activity that could be accomplished in one or two evenings. Lead: Barbara Mordo

Phoning in the evening from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. was particularly effective; if phoning was done earlier in the evening, people were involved with dinner.

**4. Follow-up Phoning** took place after the Walkathon at Intero Real Estate April 12 and 14.

Approximately 22 (for April 12) and 18 (for April 14) volunteers from the community, the Library staff, and personal networks phoned Los Altos and Los Altos Hills voters. A small group of eight did additional follow-up phoning from Alain Pinel Real Estate the next week and on Monday, April 25 and Tuesday, April 26. Some also phoned from home. By this time, many had already voted and so this was a less successful activity. Leads: Kris and Dennis Potter, Nancy Tucker

**5. Two email messages** went out to 700 individuals that Barbara knew. They represented key segments of the community: Los Altos Hills Ladies Club, Rotary, Newcomers, and the Red Cross Board, to mention a few. The recipients were asked to forward our message to others. One effective example: Barbara said that Wanny Hersey (Bullis Charter School principal) forwarded the email to her parents; hence this email reached the parents of 130 students. Another email message went out during the week of follow-up phoning. Leads: Barbara Mordo; Pat Frischmann and Nancy Tucker (email authors)

**6. Signs:**

We had 500 yard signs printed highlighting our message: “Make your vote count! Mail your ballot April 5 – April 26”, around the attractively designed campaign logo. Approximately 10 volunteers placed them on well-traveled streets during the week prior to the Walkathon. Other signs were distributed during the Walkathon, at the Library endowment event, “Speaking Volumes,” to those who requested them, and at elementary schools. (To place signs at the elementary schools, each sign had to carry the additional message, “Measure A and B endorsed by the PTA Council.” The Mountain View Los Altos High School District did not permit any signage.) Leads: Elayne Dauber (for printing), Pat Johnson (for placement and distribution of signs)

We also printed 2000 car signs/flyers with the same message and logo on 8 1/2 x 11 yellow sheets with content in blue. The flyers were mounted in car windows and given out during the Walkathon.

**7. Walkathon:**

Activities that involve community members convert them into supporters. They make the issue their issue: One hundred become one thousand or more “yes” votes, according to Elayne Dauber. The Walkathon was a successful and strategically planned community event which was organized for both the 2004 and 2005 election.

Since the Walkathon organizers had precinct information from the 2004 election about voters who overwhelmingly supported the library and those who were only marginal supporters, they targeted marginal precincts. By analyzing 2004 election results, the organizers found out that the further one is from the two local libraries, the less likely one is to use and support the library.

The Walkathon took place on Saturday morning, April 9, from about 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., soon after the voters had received their mail ballots. Organized by a community member, 60 enthusiastic (out of 72 that signed up) students from four high school service clubs, walked precincts in pairs. Ten drivers (out of approximately 21 potential volunteers) were recruited from the Rotary Club, from past participants, and from other committee and community members. One Los Altos Library staff member also volunteered to drive. Each pair of students had a cell phone as did the drivers; each car took about four or more students, yard signs, and literature. When students registered, they were briefed and snacked; the drivers received the literature. Walkers distributed campaign materials: the San Jose Mercury Editorial and “Answers to Hard Questions” on one sheet, flyers, and yard signs to those wanted materials and literature to those not at home.

One suggestion would be to take care of registration as quickly and efficiently as possible, briefing both the drivers and the students assigned to them at the same time so that they could think of themselves as the team for their assigned area(s).

Incidentally, for a fee, the County Registrar of Voters will provide detailed past precinct election results. (2004 election information was obtained from a County Library manager.)

### **8. Publicity:**

1. Major Publicity: Pat Frischmann arranged with the Town Crier editor a front page story and editorial; Cheryl Houts, Community Librarian, and Pat met with the editor. The timely coverage ran on Wednesday, April 6 prior to the Walkathon. Another story ran later in April in conjunction with one of the library programs.
2. Minor Publicity: Los Altos High School newspaper, the Talon, ran a story in their monthly newspaper; also articles ran in the Friends' newsletter, the high school PTSA newsletter, and the Almond Elementary school newsletter. Who: Nancy Tucker, Teresa Kersten
3. Other Publicity I: Westwind Barn celebration of Earth Day. Barbara Mordo staffed two tables, displaying books from the Library, which highlighted an environmental and conservation message on one table and on the other table, displaying Measures A and B campaign literature. Many local people were in attendance – this was an effective outreach event.
4. Other Publicity II: tabling at Safeway and the Library: Nancy Couperus, Chris Morrin (Library Staff), Barbara Mordo, and Nancy Tucker. This was not a particularly effective tactic during the voting period.

### **9. Other:**

Although the paid campaign staffer for our area was helpful, (attendance at our Phonathons, delivering lists, phone scripts, and other materials) in an election such as this one, the most effective campaigning is done by community volunteers, speaking to other community members about something they carry deeply about.

### **Difficulties:**

1. We did not have a compelling message for the voters in unincorporated areas:  
One suggested message for the next campaign: "Measures A and B support the Santa Clara County Library (rather than saying "Los Altos Libraries") or, alternatively, ask if they use their local library. If yes, then ask them to vote for these measures.
2. Message to Libertarian voters: "Vote against state measures where there is no control and for local measures, which you can control. Measures A and B are local measures."
3. The three central campaign mailings were too similar and were delivered too closely together. In Los Altos, some or all even came on the same day or within a day or two. So they got tossed.
4. The most ineffective tactic was the paid campaign phoning by a group located in Utah. People were phoned several times, with at least one paid phone person, in response to a voter saying, "I've voted," "Can I read you my script? I won't get paid if I don't." Wisely, Barbara kept the voter lists for the Hills and so no paid phoning was done there. Unfortunately, paid individuals phoned voters in Los Altos that we were not able to phone.
5. Timely information about who had voted was not delivered. Also, the information that was delivered was not accurate. People had voted but the information did not appear on the lists that were returned to us. Telling voters to call the Registrar of Voters was also not an effective strategy. By this time, voters felt they had done enough. Some of the people phoned on April 25 were annoyed and upset since they had already voted and had already been contacted several times. We think that in our communities, the people who cared voted in the first week or two.