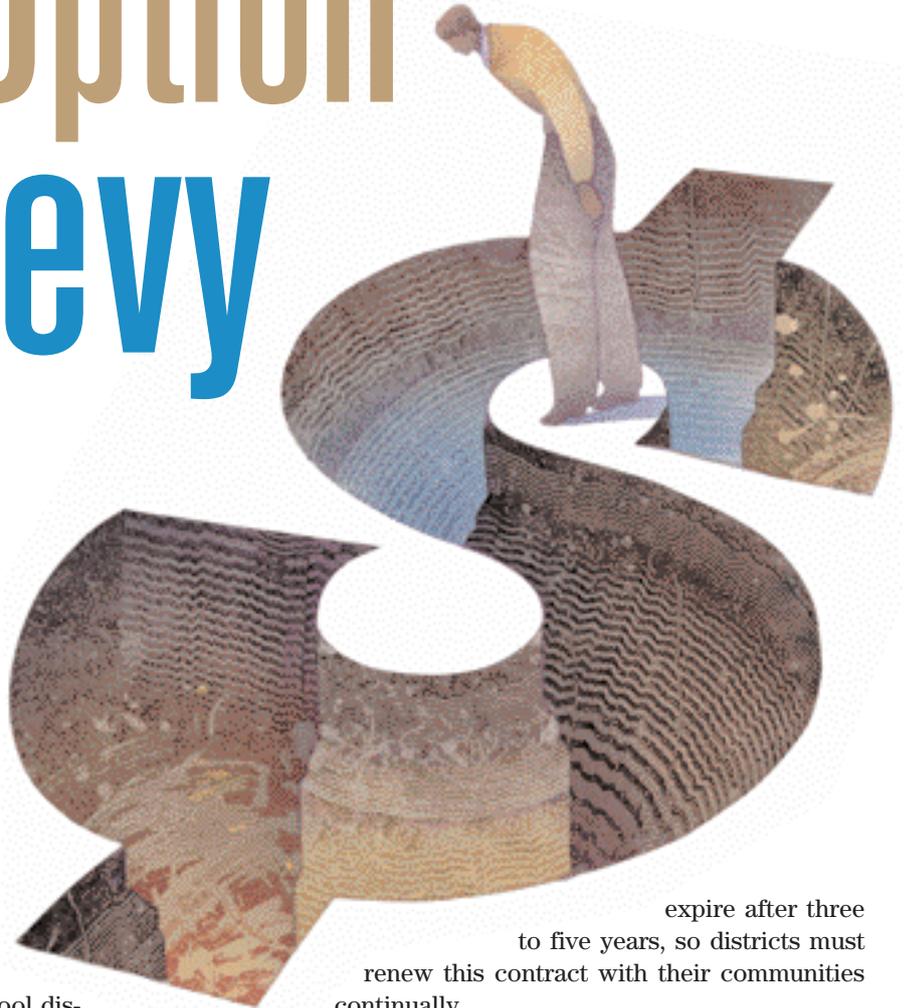


Local-Option Levy

*Getting out the vote
is a must,
but carefully parsing
your election rolls
can be the difference
between failure and success*

Steven Klein



To promote educational equity, many states have adopted formulas that redistribute local property tax revenue evenly across school districts. Many districts also attempt to pass local-option levies to generate additional tax dollars so they can improve the quality of education. Is this something your district should consider?

The Riverdale School District in Portland, Ore., held a local-option levy last fall, receiving approval from voters to impose a supplemental tax on district property owners. The tax is usually a dollar amount per \$1,000 of assessed property value; in Riverdale it was 65.5 cents when we went to voters last fall. Passing the local-option levy in Riverdale was particularly challenging because of the presence of the large Lewis and Clark College campus within the district.

In many states, levies must be approved by a “supermajority” of district voters, meaning that school districts must meet both voter turnout and voter approval requirements. For example, a ballot measure with a 50-50 supermajority requirement would need 50 percent of active precinct voters to cast a ballot, with more than 50 percent of these voters approving the measure. Local-option levies usually

expire after three to five years, so districts must renew this contract with their communities continually.

Reaching a minimum voter threshold can be a challenge, particularly if the vote is scheduled in an off-election year. Only a subset of voters—typically those with children in school—has sufficient motivation to vote.

Overcoming voter apathy is one avenue; a second, less-obvious approach is to weed out those who no longer reside in your precinct but still appear on your active voter rolls. Since these people count toward your voter turnout base, their names must be removed from the list before election day to increase the likelihood that you will meet the minimum turnout threshold.

This is the approach we took in Riverdale.

WHO IS AN ELIGIBLE VOTER?

Individuals are entered onto election rolls when they first register to vote and typically remain active until a county clerk purges their names. States have different criteria for labeling individuals as active or inactive and for removing voters from the registration rolls.

In Oregon, for example, voters are considered active as long as the postal service can deliver mail to their registration addresses. This means all registered voters count toward voter turnout in a local-option election, whether they participate in the electoral process or live in the district (such as students away at college).

When the U.S. Postal Service notifies the county elections board that a voter no longer lives at the registered address, the board mails a notification postcard to that address, then reclassifies the voter's registration from active to inactive. The voter's file is canceled unless he or she votes or updates the registration before two general elections have been held. At this point, the individual can be legally removed from the registration rolls.

To improve the odds of achieving a minimum voter turnout in your precinct, begin identifying ineligible voters as early as possible, and no later than four weeks before the election. Start by visiting the board of elections and ordering a list of active registered voters—in electronic format, if possible. Enter this list into a database that will allow you to sort information using different criteria and update files to account for any changes that may occur. You can then narrow the base of potential voters.

NARROWING THE BASE

The following steps can help you whittle down the base of potential voters:

- **Identify sites that may have high concentrations of ineligible voters.** Look for locations with a large concentration of apartments or rental units, such as college residence dorms—students may have graduated or moved off campus but retained their campus mailboxes. Make sure all registered students still live in your precinct. Other locations to examine include areas near military bases, hospital complexes, gambling casinos, or corporate headquarters.

- **Identify voters who no longer live at their registration address.** Consider reviewing online student directories, checking the names on dorms or apartment mailboxes or security telephones, or perusing online or hard copy telephone listings. Narrow your search by using the birthdates in voter registration records to identify people who may have graduated or moved. Also check for individuals who share the same last name at a single address to identify children who have moved away but not been removed from the voter rolls.

- **Look for duplicate or fraudulent voter entries.** Voters may be listed multiple times in election board rolls if an individual inadvertently or purposely registered more than once or fraudulently created additional registration cards. Also, information sometimes is incorrectly entered at the county board of elections. Be on the alert for names of celebrities or suspicious-sounding names that may have been entered by people with a misplaced sense of humor.

- **Let county elections clerks know of suspect lists.**

State election laws often permit individuals to challenge the registration status of voters who are no longer eligible to vote. Use your database to identify voters you believe are ineligible and file a formal challenge to each one. While these voters may still be counted toward your base, your challenges will be helpful if you need to contest an election.

- **Monitor election results and challenge suspicious ballots.** In states with vote-by-mail systems, elections may extend over one or more weeks; states with single-day elections will obtain all results at once. If your state has an extended voting period, plan to monitor returned ballots, confirm that ineligible voters have not cast ballots, and track turnout for your own get-out-the vote effort.

GETTING OUT THE VOTE TO WIN

As you go through the process of culling ineligible voters, think about strategies to improve the return of ballots in support of your measure.

Often abysmal election results reflect failure to fully explain the issues to your constituency. Developing effective communication strategies is critical if you have many residents without children in the schools. For example:

- Host neighborhood coffees at the homes of longtime citizens to discuss ballot issues.

- Develop targeted letters that explain the issues and include notes or pictures from young students.

- Post informational signs in the windows of businesses and distribute lawn signs to supporters.

- Work with college student government representatives and college administrators to communicate information.

- Walk the neighborhoods, dorms, and campuses to hand out literature and put a human face on the issue.

- Coordinate with student life directors, higher education student government leaders, and human resources staff to develop strategies for identifying ineligible voters.

- Place an unofficial ballot box near students' mailboxes so they can return completed ballots without adding postage or looking for an official balloting site.

Finally, remember effective local-option campaigns require you to organize and run an aggressive get-out-the-vote effort. Ideally, if you keep tabs on your likely voters and monitor those who have already voted, you will know the results of your election before the polls even close.

While you should make every effort to reduce the minimum turnout needed to qualify your election, ultimately, you must still convince a majority of your voters that your levy is the fair and right solution to funding your local schools. Riverdale managed to do that and increase taxes to \$1.07 cents per \$1,000 assessed valuation—an astonishing 41.5 cent increase that will go a long way toward funding a better education for all students.

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