

## Conducting an Issues Advocacy Campaign

- A. An Issues Campaign - By definition, is an organized effort to educate the voting general public on your issue and to mobilize them to support your position in the appropriate way. In planning any campaign, remember: only registered voters can vote, and knowing which ones you will need to turn out can be pivotal to your success. Not everyone votes, so using your resources wisely becomes important.

Issue campaigns differ from traditional candidate campaigns in some respects.

1. No specific candidate is running but rather a policy or action is running.
2. It can be difficult to identify people who might be supportive on the policy; therefore, it is harder to get activists and volunteers involved. You will probably have to work a little harder in finding volunteers as opposed to a candidate campaign where political parties make it somewhat easier to identify supporters.
3. You often do not know your opponents in an issue campaign until late in the effort. People tend to lay low in most elections until near the end of a campaign and that can be more true in an issues campaign unless it is a highly visible issue. As a counter example, in candidate campaigns you most generally know your opponents early and can plan your campaign differently. That's because there is usually a primary, filing dates, etc.

- B. There are a number of questions to answer as you and your board look into the possibility of participating in or leading an issue campaign. Let's examine a few of them.

1. What is the issue?
2. Will REALTORS® understand the issue and will most support the Board's position on it? (Keep in mind that the Board's good name and reputation are at some risk, and strong member support is essential.)
3. Will the public, that is non-REALTORS®, have an interest in the issue? Does the public feel strongly on your issue, or will they by the time the campaign ends?  
\* Example of an issue of concern to the public: Rezoning an open space (proposed recreational area) in a jurisdiction to commercial.  
\* Example of an issue that might not grab the public's attention: Bond issue to improve and upgrade local schools.
4. What is the public's attitude? (Polls, surveys, focus groups)
5. What are you asking the public to do? Be sure you are asking them to do the appropriate thing. Is it to vote your way, or to call/write a key public official? There the public can be called on to help.
6. What kind of campaign will be needed to garner public support? Will you need to spend a great deal of effort and resources on educating the public, or will a modest effort achieve the desired result?
7. Are there sufficient funds to conduct the campaign? We always hear campaign pros say there is never enough time nor money for any campaign. In reality some money will be needed to run the campaign. A longer campaign will have very different financial needs from a short intensive campaign.

8. What are the opponent's strengths and how much are they going to spend on their effort? Be realistic in this assessment. Remember this wise political advice from a REALTOR® "Never underestimate opponents who are fighting private property rights."
9. What other groups will actively support your campaign? Do not assume that because a group has supported or opposed you in the past that they will again behave similarly in the current situation.
10. What is the probable role of the media in the campaign? How will you maximize it or minimize it? Will the press care much at all? Will there be high interest on their part? Does some of the media have a stake in the issue?

These are a few of the questions you should consider and attempt to answer in the early stages of planning your campaign.

- C. Tracking Issues Before They Become Campaigns - Campaigns are very expensive and very time intensive for all involved. While it is sometimes necessary to have to face the real prospect of gearing up and conducting a campaign, it should be remembered that in many cases a campaign may have been avoided if early warning signs had been recognized, heeded and appropriate measures taken.

Early identification of issues is vital to successful issue management. Recognizing that an issue is emerging, and building a framework to make it work in your favor is the best prescription we know for getting in front of the issue and better controlling its consideration and development. The best way we know to begin early identification is through monitoring your local government.

It is important that REALTOR® volunteers through their Government Affairs Committee identify each and every agency and Board with taxing and rule-making authority that impacts real estate in your Board jurisdiction. Be sure to identify and have REALTOR® volunteers at those meetings to find out what is happening.

1. Know each department, time, dates and locations of their meetings. Get on their mailing lists and have the agendas in advance.
2. Report back to your committee on that agency, even if little or nothing is happening.
3. Keep good records. Get copies of minutes, agendas, lists of department staff, or City Council members' addresses and phone numbers.
4. Have a clear Board/Association policy - know what your Board's position is on an issue in question before the department, council or agency. Be ready to articulate that position when the opportunities arise. Sometimes knowing there are others in powerful groups who have studied and taken positions may bring an unrealistic proposal to an early demise.
5. Develop good working relationships with as many of the players in local government as possible.
6. Track what they do.

D. Planning a Campaign - In planning a good campaign you need to be sure to hit a few basics, such as conducting research, formalizing a specific plan, fundraising and developing your campaign organization.

### **1. Conducting Research**

Careful research needs to be conducted to determine answers to important questions like - What is the public's mood? What arguments will sway them to support you? How should the case be presented to the public?

Surveys and polls use scientific methods to determine what the answers are, through targeting representative samples of voters. The information that is gathered will help you determine what you will be saying to the public. In campaigns it is referred to as developing your message.

There are a number of professional firms that can assist your Board or group in conducting surveys to determine public sentiment. Many public relations firms provide this service. If they are too costly or not available to you, seek out local colleges in their political science or business departments. Often there are professors available to undertake your effort. One more way is to conduct a focus group, where a representative sample of people are carefully interviewed by a professional facilitator to discuss key topics.

### **2. Formalizing your Plan**

Focus on the specifics that it will take to successfully conduct the campaign.

Target voters you need to reach. Determine those who most likely will be supportive and go after their votes. Voter turnout will depend on a number of things like whether the issue is appearing on the ballot by itself, with other issues, with candidates, with high-level candidate elections or lower level positions. Will registered homeowners be your target, or perhaps renters? How do you reach them? Where will you purchase the necessary lists to send them direct mail, or make phone calls?

Determine what type of campaign you will run. Will it be a grassroots campaign or a more expensive media campaign?

Develop a campaign calendar and timelines.

### **3. Fundraising**

What are the realistic costs going to be for the campaign, and where will the money come from? Plans need to be made early to assure the success in this key area. Identify or target key groups and people for fundraising. You will need a separate committee for this important function, to divide up the effort and begin raising funds. Fundraisers need to be people who have the ability to ask people and groups for financial support, and know which groups to ask.

Consult with your Board Attorney throughout the campaign effort, especially with fundraising activities, to ensure your actions comply with local, state and federal laws. Additionally, if your Board has an Issues Mobilization Committee in place, it may have some monies already put aside to allocate to the effort.

#### **4. Developing Your Campaign Organization**

Usually a Steering Committee is pulled together (at either the Board level or Community/State level) to serve as the guiding mechanism of the campaign. The Steering Committee will be comprised of well-known individuals who have strong ties to the community/state and whose name and expertise will bring favorable light to the organization.

A campaign manager will be needed. This is someone who has the experience and time to put together and oversee a strong campaign plan and organization, who will effectively manage the campaign's resources and provide a strong hand of stability to an often hectic environment. Campaign managers are very often professionals that NAR or your state association can help you find.

Campaigns need communication, finance, and volunteer directors. If you have volunteers who have a good record of executing some of these functions and have the time to devote to the campaign, then consider using them for these functions rather than hiring professionals. By doing so, if appropriate, you can utilize those valuable finances elsewhere in the campaign.

Other considerations include, but are not limited to, location of offices, staffing, and get-out-the-vote activities.