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Funding Dade County's Transportation Improvement Program: The Citizens' Role

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Metropolitan Dade County, Florida, is currently implementing one of the most ambitious public transportation improvement programs in the United States. This program, which consists of a 20.5-mile elevated rapid transit system, a downtown people mover, and more than 1000 buses, is being funded by using bond funds passed by the voters of Dade County long before the current resurgent interest in public transportation. In many ways the success of the county's transportation improvement program is founded on the strong role citizens have had in supporting public transportation financing in Dade County. The 1970s brought citizen participation for funding transportation projects in metropolitan Dade County to the forefront. Two key referenda and thousands of citizens' meetings have provided clear direction for the county's future transportation system. Public officials and planners in Dade County were confronted with the realities of the past both nationally and locally in regard to the public's involvement in the planning of the major transportation projects. In the light of the experiences in cities in which there had been major delays or financial losses due to citizen opposition to planned transportation projects, Dade County approached the 1970s with the reality that the public must be fully involved in making funding decisions for the county's balanced transportation system.

Recognizing the need for improved transportation facilities in order to accommodate its rapidly growing population, Dade County, Florida, began a series of planning studies aimed at identifying the type of transportation system the county needed. The Miami Urban Area Transportation Study (MUATS), which had begun in 1964 and was completed in 1969, culminated in the passage of two transportation bond issues (in November 1972) that totalled \$260 million. These two issues consisted of a unified transportation system that emphasized public transportation (\$132.5 million) and a street and safety improvement program (\$113.5 million) as part of 10 issues that involved a broad range of public improvement projects. The two transportation issues evolved from a series of public hearings conducted as part of the MUATS process in which citizens had an opportunity to express themselves on the various elements studied in MUATS.

Initially, the MUATS long-range transportation study focused on a major expansion of the county's highway network that would add nine new expressways and on the development of a medium-capacity transit system. In the late 1960s that plan was taken to the community in a series of public hearings in which strong opposition developed to the expanded expressway system. Strong support surfaced from almost every major citizen group in the county for the transit portion of the study and the need to improve the existing highway network to make better use of what currently existed. Thus, almost three years prior to a financing plan for the improved

transportation system, citizen involvement began molding Dade County's future transportation system.

Following the adoption of the Decade of Progress (DOP) bond issue in 1972, a second significant referendum was held in March 1978. Because a citizens' group called Stop Transit Over People (STOP) had gathered more than 10 000 signatures from registered voters, the repeal of the 1972 bond issue was placed on the ballot as a referendum at a time when the county was preparing the complete final design of portions of the rapid transit system and beginning construction. This repeal attempt was defeated by a narrow margin. However, this referendum was perhaps the most interesting example of the key role that citizens can play in getting funding for transportation programs passed.

PARTICIPANTS

Supporters

As the 1972 DOP referendum approached, it became clear that a strong grass-roots citizens' group was needed to help publicize the 10 bond issues being offered to the public by the county manager and commissioners. By mid-October, the County Committee, a group of citizens concerned about the future direction of Dade County, announced their formation and endorsed all 10 bond issues. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the issues endorsed by the County Committee. Members of the County Committee included prominent black leaders; representatives of the two leading newspapers in the community, the Miami Herald and the Miami News; industrialists and businessmen from throughout Dade County; and other individuals from key community groups. The League of Women Voters was the first group to officially endorse specifically the rapid transit provision in DOP. The league did not join the County Committee; however, it made its own effort, directed primarily at the rapid transit issue.

Support for DOP came from almost every area of the community. On October 29, 1972, the mayor of Miami announced support for the entire bond issue while at the same time the city of Coral Gables Times strongly endorsed the rapid transit bond issue, calling it the most important issue. The South Dade Chamber of Commerce unanimously supported all 10 proposals as did the Miami Herald, the Miami News, and local newspapers in Miami Beach and South Dade.

It became clear in 1972 that the supporters of

Table 1. DOP bond issues.

Bond Issue	Estimated Maximum Millage (mills/\$)	Amount per Issue (\$000 000s)		
		Proposed County Bonds	Eligible Federal or State Aid	Total Capital Improvements
Sanitary sewers	0.12	50.0	25.0	75.0
Solid-waste disposal	0.12	50.0	0	50.0
Unified transportation—rapid transit	0.31	132.5	673.0	805.5
Health-care facilities	0.21	88.6	15.5	104.1
Libraries	0.08	34.7	0	34.7
County buildings	0.17	70.9	7.5	78.4
Rehabilitation of homes	0.02	10.0	0	10.0
Parks, recreation, cultural facilities	0.18	75.8	30.5	106.3
Zoological park	0.02	8.0	0	8.0
Street and safety improvements	0.27	113.5	35.5	149.0
Total	1.50	634.0	787.0	1421.0

the bond issues were the major community leaders countywide. The same type of support surfaced during the 1978 recall referendum. In addition, a strong grass-roots citizens' effort evolved from the county's public involvement program implemented during the preliminary engineering program for the transit system. This group, called Citizens for Improved Transportation (CFIT), consisted of hundreds of citizens who had never been involved in referendum issues but were strongly supporting the rapid transit system. The County Committee was revived for the recall referendum and coordinated all activities with the citizens' effort. Again, every major newspaper and local elected official supported the rapid transit bonds and urged voters to reject the recall effort.

Opposition

In 1972, opposition to DOP formed early during county-held public hearings conducted in September to explain the issues. Interestingly, the first signs of opposition occurred in South Dade over the issue of whether too much bond money was being spent for arterial-road improvements. A leading citizen activist who had been successful in a drive to recall four county commissioners the previous spring announced his opposition to the entire program. Citizens in Miami Beach, led by a local activist who later spent eight years opposing the transit system, asked the county commission at a public hearing to defer the vote to give citizens a better opportunity to understand the \$634 million bond issue.

In mid-October, several civic associations, including the North Miami Beach Property Owners' Association, the Dade County Association of Unincorporated Areas, and the Miami Beach Taxpayers and Home Owners' Association, formed the Truth About the Bond Proposals Committee. This committee represented the traditionally anti-Metropolitan Dade County groups. The opponents focused on two issues: (a) Dade County was defrauding the people by misleading them on the amount of taxes necessitated by the bonds, and (b) there should be a 120-day delay in the referendum to give people a better chance to understand the issues.

In 1978 a single individual opposed to the rapid transit system organized the group called STOP in the effort to recall the bond issue passed in 1972. This group consisted primarily of the same individuals who opposed the DOP issues. In addition,

STOP appealed to those citizens and areas who felt they were not included in the direct benefits of the then-completed plans for the rapid transit alignment. (STOP focused its attention on Miami Beach, Northeast Dade County, and South and Southwest Dade.)

ELECTION STRATEGIES

The approach to winning the 1972 and 1978 referenda and the role citizen involvement played in those campaigns differed widely. In 1972 two strategies were employed by the County Committee. The first strategy emphasized, through newspaper advertisements and a speakers' bureau, the tremendous amount of matching dollars generated by the bond-issue proposal. By using an identification campaign, the committee targeted community leaders and purchased newspaper ads in the leader's community to show their support for the bond issue. The second strategy used an elaborate slide show that was taken by the committee to every civic and service organization in the county.

A great deal of the material produced and presentations arranged in the 1972 referendum was county-sponsored in an effort to explain a fairly complicated proposal. Very little of what would be called a grass-roots campaign was attempted. This was primarily due to the short time frame between September and November 7, 1972, which was when the Board of County Commissioners had agreed to five public hearings and the referendum. Mass media became the primary tool to communicate the importance of DOP. This strategy was obviously very successful, since the bond issues passed and transit passed by the widest margin of all issues.

The 1978 recall election was an excellent example of citizen involvement and the role citizens can play in supporting financing for transportation programs. A strong citizen base of support had developed between 1972 and 1978 for the county's rapid transit system, primarily through the implementation of a community involvement program during preliminary engineering and final design for the transit system. Over a five-year period the county held 2000 meetings at which more than 80 000 people participated. Upon notice of the recall referendum, active members from the community organized the CFIT committee.

It was recognized early in the 1978 referendum that a strong grass-roots effort would be vital in defeating the issue at the polls. Although the transit system was supported by most elected and public officials, the timing of this referendum was very important. "Proposition-13 fever" was spreading across the nation, and most political analysts in the county felt that rapid transit would become a target for taxpayers frustrated with perceived high taxes. In addition, the March referendum was a single-issue ballot that traditionally attracted low turnouts and high percentages of anti-Dade County voters. Finally, the same anti-Dade County coalition that had opposed the 1972 bond issue was sure to support recall of the bond issue in 1978.

The grass-roots election strategy for the recall referendum had four important dimensions. First, CFIT held a series of press conferences and issued news releases declaring who they were and why they were opposing the recall. CFIT used news releases throughout the campaign to publicize the broad base of support attracted to CFIT. Second, members of CFIT, the League of Women Voters, and other citizens ran a two-week phone bank aimed at getting out the protransit vote. This was very successful and served as the cornerstone of the citizens' effort. More than 200 people made calls each night for two weeks prior to the referendum. Not only was this an

effective way of adding a personal approach to the campaign effort, it helped unify a diverse range of citizens who were all working for a common purpose.

The third dimension of the citizen effort was the targeting of literature to special groups. In Dade County there are many large diverse groups such as the Latin community, the black community, the elderly, and the transit riders. An early strategy that evolved from this part of the citizen effort emphasized that each protransit group must be appealed to in a different fashion from the one standard campaign strategy used by the County Committee. Literature, radio, television, newspaper ads, bumper strips—all had to be aimed at the public that they were trying to reach. Again, the emphasis was to get the vote out, particularly in those areas that would be directly affected by the rapid transit and improved bus system.

Finally, the County Committee, by using professional political advisors, ran a sophisticated newspaper ad and personal-identification campaign. Through the County Committee, the grass-roots citizen effort was coordinated so as not to conflict with the professional approach to the referendum. Representatives of CFIT participated in all County Committee policy decisions. However, it was quite clear that if citizens were to have an impact on the referendum, a separate organization such as CFIT had to operate independently from the County Committee.

WHAT WAS LEARNED

A number of lessons were learned from both experiences with citizen participation in transportation-financing referenda:

1. Today it appears to Dade County as well as throughout the nation that it is much easier to mobilize citizen support for mass transit issues than for highway issues.

2. Local governments must aggressively seek, keep informed, and maintain open lines of communication with people in diverse vocations so they may turn to them in times that require community support for transportation funding. This can be done through the establishment of ongoing transportation committees. Dade County established several special-purpose committees, which included the citizen involvement program for MUATS, the Transit Preliminary Engineering Program, a citizens' transportation committee to oversee the schedule and budget for the transit construction program, and a committee for the elderly and the handicapped. Local governments can use their constituents as a strong

base of support for the policies adopted when the process includes citizen participation.

3. Each community in the county has numerous service and social organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Rotary Club, and Kiwanis Club. These groups must be kept informed of progress being made on transportation projects in their communities. Such groups can generate an enormous amount of influence and resources in the community either in favor of or opposed to financing for transportation projects. For this reason, a great deal of attention should be taken to keep them involved in the planning and implementation of major transportation projects.

4. Grass-roots efforts can be very effective in single-issue campaigns. Citizens can have a tremendous impact on the outcome of referenda sponsored by local governments. The public must perceive that funding for transportation programs is supported by a broad cross section of the community. Clearly, it is not enough to have elected local officials and public employees alone persuade the public that they should tax themselves for transportation improvements. Leading civic spokespersons, chambers of commerce, labor and minority leaders, and others must participate in efforts to secure favorable passage of transportation funding.

5. Perhaps one of the most important roles citizens have in getting transportation-funding measures passed is their ability to relate to their neighborhoods. No one is better equipped to assist in identifying what is needed to get issues across to the people than the people themselves. In both Dade County referenda, citizen volunteers were very effective at getting their neighborhood associations and neighbors out to vote.

A balanced campaign strategy is needed for passage of major transportation programs. A strong political base must be present, a professional political advisor and fund raiser are essential, and a strong grass-roots citizens' effort must augment these efforts. Citizens will continue to play a larger role in campaign efforts as it becomes more and more difficult to get the public's endorsement of new tax proposals for any government-sponsored project. The credibility citizens add to organized campaigns cannot be denied. We only need to look at the grass-roots nationwide thrust of the Proposition-13 movement to know that citizens can profoundly affect the outcome of important tax proposals.

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Partnership in Funding Public Transit: Seattle Metro

TRACY E. DUIKER

The Seattle Metro transit system is financed by an interesting combination of partners that includes the transit rider, the service-area resident, and the state. Although the transit rider contributes via the fares paid, the contribution from the other two partners is made available to the transit system by way of taxes levied by the transit agency. Both taxes—the retail sales tax and the motor vehicle excise tax—are available on an ongoing basis without being subject to any state or local jurisdictional appropriation process. Yields from these taxes are driven by the local economy and are anticipated to rise at least with inflation. This combination of local revenues is available to support both the operating

and the capital needs of the system. This partnership in transit funding has proved to have been a very successful means of improving transit over the last decade. The combination of funding sources has provided both sufficient resources and sufficient flexibility to enable Seattle Metro to build a better-than-promised transit system. The reasons advanced a decade ago for the involvement of all three partners have become even more compelling. For this reason the Transit 1990 plan of Seattle Metro challenges each partner to provide the increased resources necessary to enable the system to continue to respond to the demand for transit service.