

## **THE TIES THAT BIND: SUCCESSFUL COALITION BUILDING FOR REFERENDUM OR INITIATIVE CAMPAIGNS**

### **Magnifying Your Clout**

Your ad hoc community group is frustrated. You've spent the last ten months sitting in public hearings, writing letters to Councilmembers and just plain carping to anyone who'd listen that your City is about to allow one more inappropriate development that will clog your highways with more cars and pollution, put another nail in the coffin of local small farmers and add to an already bulging school population.

You've had enough! Your group, *Cows not Condos*, is made up of small farmers afraid of losing their way of life and economic well being to a more affluent lifestyle. They've already seen family farms succumb to the lure of a fast buck or the pressure of fast talking developers. And they worry that their own sons and daughters will not want to follow in their tradition, leaving the land they love vulnerable to more condos and longer commutes.

Along with your group, a handful of environmentalists have joined in to support the cause. They too value the contribution small farmers make to the community, especially protecting some of the last remaining open space and greenbelts that keep the town from becoming nothing but bedrooms, superhighways and strip malls.

They also worry about the air pollution from more cars and have written their own protest letters and spoken out at numerous public hearings.

Even with these two active, vocal groups, the message is getting lost in the general rush toward "progress."

You decide to put an measure on the ballot to initiate an "Urban Growth Boundary" that will slow development, and keep it within urban limit lines.

How do you wage a successful campaign against the well heeled development and real estate interests who are sure to line up against you?

You build a coalition that reaches beyond the narrow confines of your own interest group. In this way, small grassroots groups can magnify your clout.

### **Finding Unlikely Allies to Support Your Campaign**

In building effective coalitions for campaigns, you need to ask yourself much the same questions you would in raising money for a candidate: Who benefits from this election?

You may be surprised at the answers.

In putting together a coalition to run a campaign to require any new construction at our historic Civic Center in Marin County, California, to be put to a vote of the people, our preservationist group attracted the interest of prison reformers (because a new jail was being contemplated at the site), anti-tax advocates (who feared being made to foot the bill for some lavish building projects) and neighbors who wanted to keep things quiet.

Together, we sought endorsements from conservationist groups, like the Sierra Club, and social justice groups who joined our ranks as volunteer precinct workers and phone bankers, and not incidentally, donated enough money to run a winnable campaign.

Similarly, when plans were unveiled for a biotech medical research facility on one of the most visible hillsides in the county, a coalition was formed by many of the same groups. With the addition of animal rights activists (who opposed animal testing) and local service providers (who objected because Community Foundation funding for the facility would cut into their own resource pool), a referendum opposing the project passed easily.

Conversely, an effort to stop a new golf course on the site of a historic blue oak forest failed, because the developers were able to offer discount greens fees to local golfers, a community that outnumbered the environmentalists who led the opposition.

### **Finding the Right Mix**

In the hypothetical example given above, this group might reach out to parents and teachers in the crowded local school system, anti-tax advocates who understand that the infrastructure requirements for this new development will come out everyone's pockets, commuters who will be facing longer and more polluted trips each day and small businesses who feel threatened by the commercial aspects of ever increasing development.

All of these groups have something to gain and something to lose. The benefits of controlled growth must be "pitched" to each group in terms they can relate to. The other side will be touting economic prosperity and new jobs. To build a successful coalition, you need to provide both the positives and negatives for your new partners: How the successful outcome to this election will help them and how a defeat will hurt their interests.

Then, together, with the help of a good campaign consultant, you translate this into a message the average voter can relate to.

### **Keeping your Coalition Together**

Inevitably conflicts arise in the Coalition. Some members feel strongly that their particular issue is the one that should be most heavily emphasized. Others disagree, and the whole thing is in danger of falling apart, unless consensus can be reached.

Here are a few tips for holding your Coalition together for a successful campaign.

1. Keep your eyes on the prize: Winning the election is the goal here, not increasing membership or even educating the public about your cause. It doesn't matter WHY people vote for your measure, only that they DO vote for it.
2. Have a good group facilitator: A good facilitator can make sure everyone's opinions are heard and still keep the goal, winning the election, at the forefront of every meeting.
3. Hire a skilled consultant, one with a successful track record of winning elections with diverse Coalitions: Your consultant can keep your membership on course toward election day both by acting as a neutral advocate (she advocates for your campaign, not for any one Coalition partner), and by being a skilled campaigner who can keep you focused and the voters informed.
4. Make sure each Coalition partner brings their membership to the table: Mobilizing their own membership will be key on Election Day. Also sign up their members for phone banking, precinct walking, office work and other necessary campaign tasks.
5. Keep perspective and call a truce: You may not agree with some of the positions taken by Coalition partners. (Anti-tax advocates and social service providers are often at odds, so clashes will occur when they join forces for a common goal.) Still, the goal of winning this election must take precedence over any outside battles you may have with each other.
6. Remember who the audience is: The majority of the voters don't belong to any of the Coalition groups. They need to know how this initiative will help them. Keep the voters uppermost in your minds, and the day-to-day squabbles will be kept at a minimum. Don't let the voters see contentiousness in your camp or they will stay away from the polls in droves, if not vote for the other side.

With these simple tips in mind, you can work together with almost anyone who shares a common goal, even if the other 99% of your opinions are wildly divergent.

If you get your coalition together early enough in the process, you may be able to avoid the cost of an election altogether by convincing the decision makers in your City or County to adopt the measure you are advocating. The power of a strong grassroots coalition effort cannot be underestimated. The elected officials you are trying to persuade will understand you speak for more than a narrow viewpoint and that each Coalition partner represents a large number of constituents.

Whether running an electoral campaign or persuading authorities to adopt your measure, you can't afford to pass up the opportunity to work with others who might support your cause if they only know about it. Don't let the other side get to them first. Building a Coalition may be the key to success in your election or cause.

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