Laying the Foundation for a Successful Rail Referendum Campaign

*Lessons from Phoenix, St. Louis County, and Honolulu*

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Master’s Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines lessons learned from rail-related referendum campaigns in St. Louis County, MO; Phoenix, AZ; and Honolulu, HI. Using results of interviews from campaign leaders in each location as well as archival research and published literature, it distills these lessons into three broad themes: building and maintaining successful coalitions, developing and disseminating resonant campaign messages, and responding effectively to critics. Additionally, it briefly examines other important campaign issues, including the tradeoffs between holding rail-related referenda during general or special elections, responding to homeowners or business owners whose property will be disrupted by the installation of the resulting project, and selecting and managing consultants. The purpose of this report is to provide guidance to leaders of an upcoming referendum campaign in Orange, Durham, and Wake Counties, North Carolina, where voters will decide whether to increase sales tax rates to fund the introduction of light and commuter rail service as well as an expanded network of bus service.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project stems from an abiding interest in the role of public transportation—and rail transit in particular—to improve the sustainability and livability of urban areas. This interest has been cultivated and refined by the faculty in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, where I have been profoundly privileged to study for the past two years. I owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have challenged my thinking, imparted new skills, and prepared me for a career in the field of urban planning.

In particular, I am grateful to Professor Daniel Rodriguez for his guidance throughout the Master’s Project process, one which saw this particular project evolve through several complications. I am thankful not only for his patience and expertise on this particular effort, but for his wise counsel and personal kindness throughout my time here in DCRP. I have learned a great deal in his classes, in his office, and from his mentorship.

I am also deeply indebted to the individuals who took time from their busy schedules to speak with me about their roles in the campaigns examined in this paper. Their insight is the foundation of this project, and it was my pleasure to have reported it.

Finally, I want to thank my friends and classmates in the Department of City and Regional Planning. As we have worked on our various projects, we have enthusiastically shared findings, asked questions, endured challenges, and celebrated successes. To have done all those things alongside them made them all the more rewarding.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
April 2010
In November 2011, Orange, Durham, and Wake Counties, NC, will hold a referendum authorizing a 0.5% sales tax increase to expand transit service and technologies in the “Research Triangle” area. A centerpiece of the expansion, designed by the Special Transit Advisory Committee (STAC) commissioned by two local metropolitan planning organizations, is the introduction of light rail and commuter rail routes throughout the tri-county region, providing new modal choices to residents in an area increasingly characterized by long-distance commutes, traffic congestion, and urban sprawl.

The need for alternative visions for the area’s growth has gained substantial momentum in recent years, as evidenced by, among other things, strong development management policies in towns such as Chapel Hill, the prevalence of “new-urbanist” communities throughout the area, a progressive comprehensive plan for the City of Raleigh, and an extensive “Reality Check” scenario-building exercise conducted by the Urban Land Institute. For many observers, these conditions—along with broader movements like climate change awareness, projected increases in fuel prices, imminent changes to carbon pricing policies, etc.—suggest an environment which may be favorable for the referendum.

Although ballot measures supporting public transit initiatives have received strong support in recent years, their success is far from guaranteed. According to results compiled by the Center for Transportation Excellence, roughly 72% of all transit-related referenda over the past five years in the United States have been successful. Naturally, the details of these referenda varied widely, as did the geographies, current levels of transit service, concurrent ballot measures, and political climates of the jurisdictions in which they were held.

### Results of Transit-Related Referenda, 2005-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Ballot Items</th>
<th>Approved</th>
<th>Defeated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>44</td>
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Source: Center for Transportation Excellence

A key issue in the Triangle’s 2011 referendum is the introduction of rail service into an area which is currently served only by traditional bus and on-demand transit. Many planners, public officials, and advocates regard this proposition as a key component to increasing mobility, relieving congestion, and modifying land use patterns in a more responsible and sustainable manner, one which will maintain the high quality-of-life which will continue to attract and retain residents and employers. But a successful campaign for the referendum will have to overcome some skepticism about these transit technologies based on the following sentiments and likely many others:

- Whether levels of population, employment, and housing density in the Triangle area can support adequate rail ridership
- The perception of rail transit as an inefficient subsidy
Increased transit investments do not meet the demands of residents in the area, who commute overwhelmingly by automobile.

Whether focusing on road expansion and construction is a more effective strategy for relieving congestion.

The sheer cost of the investment.

The routes will not benefit them, directly or indirectly.

But most importantly, the success of the ballot measure will depend strongly on the general quality of the campaign itself, including its organization, leadership, funding levels, message discipline, marketing, engagement of key stakeholders and constituent groups, coalitions, and voter turnout. As with any political exercise, context sensitivity—the knowledge of what resonates with and motivates local voters and officials—is crucial, and must be considered thoughtfully and strategically.

**PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to relay lessons learned from leaders of rail-related referenda in three areas: St. Louis County, MO (2008)\(^1\); Phoenix, AZ (2000); and Honolulu, HI (2008). These three referenda were selected for the following reasons:

- The introduction or expansion of rail transit was a significant component of the ballot measure.
- They represent elections with which leaders in the Triangle may be less familiar and with whom they may have not had previous contact.
- They represent a diversity of proposals (a new light rail system in Phoenix, a light rail expansion in St. Louis, and an elevated commuter rail line in Honolulu), and their successes have been varied.
- The urban form served by their respective transit systems varies considerably.
- They each provide excellent examples of the famous adage that “all politics is local,” meaning that they addressed their campaign based on knowledge of local demographics, transit conditions, and personalities.
- They each provided the opportunity to interview a broad set of stakeholders, including activists, elected officials, consultants, and business leaders.

This document will not provide leaders with a ready-made campaign strategy, nor will it account for every consideration involved in preparing for a successful referendum. It is also not an authoritative assessment of why certain campaigns succeed while others do not. Rather, it is envisioned as a practical assessment of issues involved in coalition-building and campaign messaging experienced in other places, hopefully providing valuable insight which may help leaders in the Triangle area add to the groundwork already completed in preparation for November 2011.

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\(^1\) The campaigns and ballot initiatives studies for this project were held in St. Louis County, which does not contain the City of St. Louis. However, for the sake of brevity, “St. Louis” is used throughout the paper. Unless otherwise specified, “St. Louis” refers to St. Louis County.
Peter Haas and Richard Werbel included elections in Phoenix and St. Louis in a study which evaluated characteristics of rail-related referenda in twelve jurisdictions. Two of their primary conclusions corroborate what the evidence from interviews for this project suggests: that “failed campaigns may successfully be repeated with appropriate adjustments” and that “involving influential representatives from the business community, environmental groups, and the political community in the planning process is important in building an enthusiastic supporting coalition.” Likewise, they observed that multi-modal packages tend to be more successful than ballot initiatives focusing on one technology.

One aim of this project is to supplement such existing research as Haas’s and Werbel’s by reporting the reflections of leaders from three campaigns of which rail transit was a substantial component in areas with which Triangle observers might be less familiar. It does not necessarily account for all the components or complexities of the individual ballot measures in Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis, nor for those in the Triangle area. It focuses on the rail issue in particular, since the introduction of light and commuter rail into Orange, Wake, and Durham Counties is the most prominent portion of the Special Transit Advisory Committee’s proposed project.

The findings and recommendations are based primarily on interviews conducted with leaders of campaigns for these referenda, and then to a lesser extent by scholarly articles published about determinants of successful transit referenda, by archival research about the initiatives themselves, and by guidance documents published by the Center for Transportation Excellence, a clearinghouse for information and best practices for transit elections. Its main purpose is to convey “on the ground” lessons learned to leaders of the upcoming Triangle referendum.

BACKGROUND ON PHOENIX TRANSIT 2000 ELECTION

Phoenix, one of the country’s largest cities, has grown tremendously in recent decades. It has long been served by an extensive regional network of buses operated under a consolidated operator known as Valley Metro. A plan which would have instituted a regional network of elevated rail lines using a sales tax increase was defeated in 1989, and subsequent referenda in the 1990s were also rejected by voters. In 1997, a proposal to expand transit investments by raising sales taxes by 0.5% was defeated by approximately 120 votes.

The Phoenix Transit 2000 Regional Transportation Plan (Transit 2000) proposed a suite of transit improvements, including enhanced bus service, the addition of express buses, and the introduction of a 20-mile light rail route, to be funded by a sales tax increase of 0.4%. The proposed light rail route extended from the northwest portion of the city along Camelback Ave., down Central Ave. into downtown Phoenix, and then eastward through Tempe, finally terminating in the western portion of Mesa. The proposed route served major commercial, cultural, and residential destinations such as the intersection of Camelback and Central Avenues, downtown amenities such as the U.S. Airways Arena and Chase Field (home to the Phoenix Suns basketball team and the Arizona Diamondbacks baseball team, respectively), Sky Harbor International Airport, and Arizona State University in Tempe.

2 Their study included the Phoenix Transit 2000 election which is also the subject of this report. The election that Haas and Werbel examined in St. Louis County occurred in 1997, prior to Proposition M in 2008.
Additionally, Transit 2000 authorized funds laying the groundwork for future extensions of the light rail route into other substantial nodes of commercial and residential activity.

Presented to city voters in a special election on March 14, 2000, the Transit 2000 plan passed overwhelmingly, with approximately 65% of voters expressing approval. According to the Federal Transit Administration, this margin of victory was among the highest ever for a transit referendum in the United States. The initial 20-mile segment of the light rail route, called METRO, opened in December 2008 and has been widely regarded as successful, exceeding ridership expectations and pleasing even some of its most ardent skeptics.

The Transit 2000 campaign was primarily led by the Phoenix Transit 2000 Citizens Committee, a coalition of neighborhood representatives, political officials, and prominent civic and business leaders. The group conducted an extensive and strategic outreach campaign to gauge public opinion and to educate voters about the proposal. Skip Rimsza, the mayor of Phoenix at the time, counted the passage of Transit 2000 as perhaps the most important accomplishment of his tenure.

In 2004, a subsequent vote to extend a previous 0.5% sales tax increase (previously approved in 1985) to fund 27 miles of expansions to the light rail route, 40 new bus routes, as well as surface street and freeway expansions was also approved by voters.

BACKGROUND ON PROPOSITIONS M AND A IN ST. LOUIS COUNTY

St. Louis began operations of its MetroLink light rail system in 1990 with a starter segment connecting its airport to East St. Louis, and expanded the system considerably throughout the 1990s. Today it operates 46 miles of light rail service in four counties, including suburban St. Louis County. The operating agency, Metro-St. Louis, also runs an extensive bus service.

In November 2008, voters in St. Louis County rejected Proposition M, which would have increased county sales taxes by 0.5% to fund an expansion of MetroLink in the county. A major issue in the campaign, according to its leaders, was a negative opinion of the operating agency, which was plagued by scandal and perceived fiscal inefficiency. As a result of the failure of Proposition M, transit services throughout the county have been scaled back because of insufficient funding.

Because of the effects of these service reductions, leaders in St. Louis County re-introduced the sales tax increase to voters. In April 2010, county voters approved the measure, Proposition A, by a 63% to 37% margin. Proposition A was essentially identical to Proposition M, authorizing a 0.5% increase in the county sales tax rate to increase transit service, including an eventual expansion of MetroLink routes. Although this light-rail expansion is included in regional transportation plans, the exact routing of the new service remains somewhat uncertain.

The participants from St. Louis County interviewed for this project were active in campaigns for both propositions. The interviews—all of which were conducted prior to the passage of Proposition A on April 6, 2010—generally focused on lessons campaign leaders learned from the defeat of Proposition M and the adjustments they were making in the campaign for Proposition A.
BACKGROUND ON OAHU RAIL REFERENDUM

The effort to introduce rail transit in some form on the island of Oahu has been longstanding. One recent initiative failed in 1992, when a proposed elevated rail line, the Honolulu Rapid Transit System, was rejected by the Honolulu City Council. Roads in Honolulu have long been characterized by notable congestion, and conditions worsened in subsequent years after 1992, particularly in the western portion of the city which was developing rapidly. The expansion of bus transit service eased congestion in some portions of the city, but by all accounts, residents faced traffic-laden commutes that were among the longest and slowest in the United States.

In May 2005, the Hawaii State Legislature passed Act 247, which authorized a 0.5% increase in the state general excise tax (from 4.0% to 4.5%) to fund transportation projects. Funds from the increase were to pay for state-level improvements as well as public transportation initiatives in Honolulu. The bill required each county council to approve the increase within its jurisdiction by the end of that year; only Honolulu County did so.

In 2006, the Honolulu Department of Transportation Services released an alternatives analysis report identifying a rail line beginning the Kapolei to the west and ending at either the University of Hawaii or Ala Moana, and the report was accepted by the City Council’s Transportation Committee. As the study and approval process for the project progressed, an organization called Stop Rail Now announced it would file a petition to place a provision on the ballot in November 2008 which read “Honolulu mass transit shall not include trains or rail.” In August 2008, the group’s petition was ruled invalid on technicalities related to submission deadlines and the required number of signatures.

Also in August 2008, the Honolulu City Council voted to include on the November ballot an amendment to the city charter asking voters to decide whether to move forward with the rail project. In the general election, which also included the presidential election and the re-election of Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hanemann, voters approved the amendment by a margin of 53% to 47%.

It is important to note that the referendum in Honolulu was literally an “up-or-down” vote on rail, not on a tax to fund a rail project per se, since the funding increase had already been approved by the Honolulu City Council in 2005. Therefore, it was slightly different than ballot measures in Phoenix, St.

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3 The city and county of Honolulu are coterminous, sharing elected leadership and political boundaries. The city and county of Honolulu encompass the entire island of Oahu. Therefore, the terms “Oahu” and “Honolulu” are used interchangeably throughout this report.
Louis, and the Triangle. Nevertheless, the campaign for the referendum, because it focused so heavily on commuter rail issues, is an instructive example for inclusion in this report.

**IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM REFERENDUM CAMPAIGNS**

Conducting a successful campaign for a referendum on rail transit involves understanding the dynamics of one’s jurisdiction in quantitative, qualitative, and strategic ways. There is no ready-made, “one-size-fits-all” campaign strategy. The issues underlying referenda in St. Louis, Phoenix, and Honolulu were in some ways very different from one another, as were the demographics, political climates, transit landscape, and ballot conditions.

Nevertheless, leaders of these campaigns were able to identify common focal points, pitfalls, organizational strategies, and other factors of successful campaigns—and reflections from the failed campaign in St. Louis—that are instructive for leaders in the Research Triangle and other areas. This report distills their reflections into three primary categories which consistently ranked as the most critical in campaign organization: coalition-building, the development and maintenance of a consistent message, and responding to critics.

These lessons were taken from interviews conducted throughout the spring of 2010 with leaders of the three referendum campaigns. The subjects of these interviews were chosen because they represented various roles in campaign leadership (e.g. elected officials, business leaders, consultants, transit advocates, etc.) and therefore could provide a diversity of perspectives. These interviews began with scripted questions and then allowed for flexibility based on the most important lessons highlighted by particular participant. Below is a list of the interviewees and their professional capacities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayne Yoshioka</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Director, Honolulu Department of Transportation Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maeda Timson</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Assistant Vice President, First Hawaiian Bank, Chair of Makakilo Kapolei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Fanslau</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Principal, Collective Influence, LLC, Campaign Manager at &quot;Go Rail Go&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyler Dos Santos-Pam</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Senior at Yale University, Advocate with &quot;We Will Ride&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Callan</td>
<td>Honolulu</td>
<td>Owner of Callan’s Tours, Co-Founder of &quot;Stop Rail Now&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Scherer</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>President, Phoenix Realtors’ Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip Rimsza</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>Mayor of Phoenix, 1994-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Tevlin</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>Deputy City Manager, Phoenix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gene Blue</td>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>President, Arizona Chapter of Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Rasmussen</td>
<td>Phoenix/St. Louis/Honolulu</td>
<td>Consultant, R&amp;R Partners, Strategist for all three campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Schout</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Executive Director, Citizens for Modern Transit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Cross</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Vice-President, Service Employees Internation Union Local 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose Windmiller</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Director of Government Relations, Washington University in St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel Erby</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Councilwoman, St. Louis Council District 1</td>
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In addition to these interviews, reflections and guidance, when applicable, have been collected from documents published by academic researchers and by the Norman Y. Mineta Institute for Surface Transportation Policy Studies and the Center for Transportation Excellence. Although some examples and anecdotes from these sources may not refer directly to referenda in the Honolulu, Phoenix, or St. Louis, they still shed valuable light on the categories of coalition-building, messaging, and responding to critics.
BUILDING, MAINTAINING, AND DEVELOPING COALITIONS

Anyone with experience in the campaign field will attest to the old truism that politics makes strange bedfellows. Bringing together leaders and constituents with different backgrounds and priorities is a critical undertaking in rail and transit referenda. Successfully doing so capitalizes on the ethos of a broad spectrum of prominent citizens, opens up a variety of funding sources, and delivers more supporting votes. Likewise, effective coalitions ensure the likelihood of the long-term success of an approved project, as noted by the Center for Transportation Excellence: “Coalitions represent a range of community interests that are more likely to influence policy makers, attract media attention, and have an impact on funding decisions, particularly for public transportation because transit systems work through an intergovernmental partnership of federal, state, and local support.”

Organizing the Coalition

The structure of a successful coalition may vary somewhat from place to place, but the lessons from the three case studies highlight a critical component of any coalition: it should be represented by a single dominant organization or committee with enough organizational capacity, institutional credibility, and political wherewithal to lead the campaign. In Phoenix, for example, the Transit 2000 Steering Committee, commissioned by the city council and mayor, consisted of leaders from local businesses, neighborhoods, trade associations, non-profits, citizen commissions, elected bodies, and governmental offices. As one member, Gene Blue (president of the Arizona Chapter of the Opportunities Industrialization Centers of America, a workforce development organization), recalled, the Steering Committee was “a broad coalition representing different expertise, different professions, different occupations, as well as representing the different geographical areas of the city of Phoenix; so it really was a diverse group that was truly representative of our city.”

In Honolulu and St. Louis, the coalitions were organized under the umbrella of advocacy organizations. Go Rail Go in Honolulu, a non-profit dedicated to educating residents about public transit, ran a campaign called “Vote Yes for Rail,” which brought together labor unions, business leaders, and others. Their board of directors consists of the president of an engineering firm, a prominent real estate agent, a close ally of Mayor Mufi Hanemann, and a neighborhood activist.

Citizens for Modern Transit (CMT) is an advocacy organization working to expand light rail services in St. Louis. The organization coordinated the “Vote Yes on Proposition A” campaign, which garnered the support of nearly fifty agencies including from faith-based groups, labor unions, local colleges and universities, advocacy groups for the disabled and elderly, planning and transportation networks, and others. CMT enlisted this coalition as part of a major educational campaign about the importance of

**COALITIONS: KEY LESSONS LEARNED**

1. Form and maintain and broad, diverse, and credible coalition.
2. Ensure that the coalition has the support of prominent elected officials.
3. Utilize the fundraising abilities of key coalition leaders.
4. Enlist the voting capital of college students.
Proposition A, the result of a series of debriefing meetings following the defeat of Proposition M in 2000. As Nancy Cross, vice-president of the local chapter of the Service Employees International Union, reflected, “We didn’t do enough education to saturate the area [in 2008]. We didn’t have a group of people out there speaking about it that were seen as civic and community leaders.”

**Whom to Include?**

A successful coalition for a rail transit referendum, whatever its formal structure, should meet the following general criteria. First, it should include a broad cross-section of organizations and individuals that might otherwise be at odds on political issues. Rail transit in the Research Triangle can logically bring together labor advocacy organizations, environmental groups, real estate professionals, prominent business people, affordable housing advocates, leaders of many types of faith communities, and several others. The ability of these diverse set of stakeholders to unite around a particular measure will undoubtedly present voters with an impression that the expansion of transportation options in the Triangle will benefit everyone regardless of their political persuasion, socioeconomic status, or geographical location. The Special Transit Advisory Committee established by local MPOs in the Triangle area is certainly a solid starting point for this type of campaign coalition.

Secondly, the coalition should have the clear and conspicuous support of elected officials. In Honolulu, Go Rail Go was supported by Mayor Mufi Hanemann, whose re-election was also on the same ballot as the rail referendum. In Phoenix, Mayor Skip Rimscza played an active role in advocating and fundraising for Transit 2000, and in large part spearheaded the campaign effort. On the other hand, political support in St. Louis County has been more difficult to enlist; as Tom Shrout, executive director of Citizens for Modern Transit, said, “For these [referenda] to be successful, a big elected official being in support is crucial. We don’t have that kind of support. It’s not that they’re against it, it’s just that they’re not driving the process, and that is a weakness of our campaign.” In the Triangle, it will be critical to ensure that a coalition of advocates is supported by elected leaders at the city, county, and state level.

Finally, the role of college and university communities, as well as the enlistment of young voters and youth in general, cannot be underestimated. As future users of the system, this demographic group can be powerful advocates for the ballot measure. Tom Shrout observed that, “A big change that I’ve seen over the last five years is college students becoming very, very interested in transit.” His organization, Citizens for Modern Transit, actively partnered with several universities in St. Louis; a more formal and focused partnership emerged in the campaign for Proposition A after election results indicated that Proposition M had carried precincts in and around Washington University in St. Louis by upwards of 90%. Mark Wrighton, the president of Washington University, was actively involved in the campaign for Proposition A, and noted in a newspaper article after the success of that measure the importance of galvanizing the support and engagement of the school’s students, alumni, and employees.

St. Louis Council president Hazel Erby has identified college students as important supporters in the Proposition A campaign: “We’ve had them come to council meetings to speak in favor of mass transit many times. We had a young man who came last night and talked about how it’s vital to him—even
though he has a car—because it’s economical. MetroLink, because it gets you where you need to go in such an economical manner, is excellent for students. I think students are our biggest advocates.”

In Honolulu, We Will Ride was a group of college-aged residents who supported the Oahu rail referendum through voter registration campaigns, social media, and public events. As Tyler Dos Santos-Tam, a leader of We Will Ride, recalled, the organization provided a new and fresh perspective on the campaign, one which stressed the positive impact the rail would have on future generations: “We wanted to position ourselves above all the rhetoric and above the public disputes, the public rancor. We just wanted to let everyone know that if and when it’s built, we will ride.” Using tools like Facebook and concerts, they were able to contribute substantially to the investment of younger voters in the rail issue.

Particularly in Orange, Wake, and Durham Counties, the voting capital of students and members of university communities is a powerful resource and could very realistically make the difference between the success or failure of the referendum. It is perhaps instructive to note that in the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama carried the state of North Carolina by only 14,177 votes over John McCain. This margin of victory is about 45% the student population of North Carolina State University, and approximately 50% of the student population at UNC-Chapel Hill. In other words, enlisting high voter turnout and support among students can yield substantial returns. And while university leaders may be restricted from endorsing individual candidates in their professional capacities, they are generally free to support measures which directly benefit their operations; certainly a well-planned regional rail network would fall into this category.

**Fundraising**

A critical function of the coalition is raising a sufficient amount of money to execute an effective campaign. While what is sufficient will vary from place to place, the campaigns in Phoenix, St. Louis, and Honolulu each involved funds exceeding $1 million. These funds came from various sources, including business leaders, unions, and other advocacy organizations. Funds for a rail referendum are utilized in fairly traditional ways, including educating and persuading the public, compensating consultants, advertising through a variety of media, and the like.

A successful coalition will naturally include people with significant experience in raising funds from a number of sources. While it is outside the scope of this report to recommend specific strategies or funding targets, it is critical that leaders plan strategically about how and from whom to solicit funds. The roles of political leaders is especially important, as they typically have reliable individuals and businesses among their supporters. Skip Rimscza, the mayor of Phoenix during the time of the Phoenix Transit 2000 referendum, noted that he personally—rather than his staff or other representatives—would solicit funds from large donors to maximize the amount raised.

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4 Funds for the campaign for Proposition M in St. Louis fell well short of this amount, so a goal of $1.2 million has been established for the Proposition A campaign. Four hundred thousand was raised by Citizens for Modern Transit for the initial education campaign, and the additional $800,000 for advocacy came from money raised by a business coalition called Advance St. Louis.
Laying the Foundation for a Successful Rail Referendum Campaign

A powerful testament to the need to line up a sufficient level of funding came from Dennis Callan, the co-founder of Stop Rail Now, which opposed the rail referendum in Honolulu. Most of Stop Rail Now’s funding, he recalled, came from one individual, and he estimated that the group’s total funding throughout the campaign was about $40,000. As a result, the group was unable to compete with the advertisements, direct mailings, and volunteer efforts coordinated by the supporters of the referendum. Indeed, Callan cited the imbalance in funds as the single greatest determinant in the result of the election.

**MESSAGING: KEY LESSONS LEARNED**

1. Develop a relevant and forceful message.
2. Deliver the message with consistency, discipline, and diversity.
3. Communicate the success of rail transit in other cities to which residents can relate.
4. Be honest with voters.
5. Use a variety of media strategically.

**GETTING AN EFFECTIVE MESSAGE OUT, AND GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT EFFECTIVELY**

Voters today are saturated by information, both in content and presentation. Never before have campaigns had such a variety of ways to connect with the public, and never before has the competition for voters’ attention and support been more fierce. It is an axiom of politics that a succinct, attractive message is critical, but crafting and disseminating such a message requires preparation, discipline, responsiveness, and resources.

As Brian Rasmussen, an advertising consultant who specializes in transit referenda and who worked on campaigns in Honolulu and St. Louis, stresses, “The only way you can stay on message is to have a message that resonates and is relevant to the majority of the population.” And, indeed, the role of consultants and political operatives is crucial in developing and delivering a successful message to the public. In Honolulu, the central message of the campaign was simple and focused on what leaders wanted voters to do: “Vote Yes for Rail.” The campaign for Proposition A highlighted the importance of transit to the region: “Some of us ride it; all of us need it.”

But a message is more than a slogan. A successful rail transit campaign message considers the priorities, values, and sensibilities of its audience, the underlying benefits of the proposed transit changes, and an optimistic vision for the region. Voters must sense that the campaign revolves around a single theme, and that this theme reflects careful planning, positive impacts, broad support, and responsible change.

The crafting and propagation of a message is, of course, largely the purview of advertising and media experts. But leaders in other fields—planning, business, politics, advocacy, etc.—must all be comfortable enough with the message to embrace it and support it collectively. Therefore, the lessons learned in this area from the three case studies will likely be instructive for leaders of the Triangle referendum.

**Effective Central Themes and Slogans**

Voters in Phoenix had a pattern of reluctance in voting for revenue increases to expand the city’s transit system. They did not approve funding for local freeways until the mid-1980s, and they narrowly rejected a proposal for expanded transit—including rail—in 1997. During the campaign for Transit 2000,
leaders stressed the urgent need for rail transit as a way to enhance Phoenix’s standing among great American cities, and to hint that sooner or later, they would regard light rail transit as absolutely necessary. As deputy city manager Jack Tevlin recalled:

“If you look at any these large cities, their transportation system had four components, those being a great road system, a freeway system, a great bus system, and a rail system. No matter where you went in the world, that was the network of transportation that they had [in great cities]. Phoenix was the largest big city in the United States that was missing [a large component of that network]. When we voted in 1985 to build freeways, the mantra was ‘Why did we wait so long?’ And here again we were going to do it with public transportation. We were going to wait until there was a huge crisis that made it impossible to build the system. So that was essentially the message.”

Leaders in Phoenix appealed to local pride, regional competitiveness, and the inevitable need for more transportation options for its residents. Steering committee members touted the success of light rail in other western American cities, and essentially challenged their citizens to keep pace with other metropolises which had diversified their transit offerings. “If we want to continue to grow and prosper,” committee member Gene Blue recalled telling voters, “we have to have a better system of mass transit.”

In the wake of the defeat of Proposition M in St. Louis in 2008, leaders reflected that a major shortcoming was the lack of an organized education campaign which touted a central theme or message. This observation was confirmed in all four interviews. As Nancy Cross, vice president of the local chapter of the Service Employees International Union, recalled, “‘There wasn’t enough education about why this was important….we didn’t do enough education to saturate the area.” Likewise, Brian Rasmussen of R&R Partners noted that “there were so many different unrelated efforts happening that there was not a cohesive message telling voters what they needed to do.”

In preparation for the Proposition A campaign, Citizens for Modern Transit led an extensive educational effort intended to “soften the turf” (as two interviewees described it) for the pre-election advocacy campaign. The central theme has catered to the mostly suburban audience within St. Louis County, much of whom does not utilize MetroLink directly. Its slogan, designed to stress the importance of the area’s light rail and bus network to this type of population, has been “Some of us ride it; all of us need it.”

In other words, leaders of the campaign have focused on the importance of expanding MetroLink and bus services to those who are unaware of the extent to which it is important for the overall function of the region’s economy. As Tom Shrout said, “After the failure [of Proposition M], the transit agency had to make a number of cutbacks in service, and all of a sudden people who didn’t have a clue how the nurses got to the hospital to take care of their relatives found out that they took [public transit] and found that they were impacted although they normally don’t
ride...so we’re emphasizing that.” Converting transit from an issue about “them” to an issue about “all of us” can be powerful and persuasive.

Honolulu, like Phoenix, had a history of rail meeting defeat at the polls throughout many years. When consultant Brian Rasmussen was retained by Go Rail Go, his task was developing a central and unified message. “My role as I saw it,” he said, “was to come in and get all the various entities of the campaign focused on one message, because they were essentially all over the board. I told the mayor that there was no way we could win this election if we continue to have scattered messages.” The slogan for the campaign became a simple and direct appeal to voters, focused, as he said, on what they literally wanted them to do: “Vote Yes for Rail.”

The simplicity of message was, of course, supplemented by other themes, but those too were deliberately aimed at the direct impact of the project on voters. As Justin Fanslau, another consultant who served as the campaign manager for Go Rail Go, reflected: “All messaging in this grassroots efforts was simple. Keep it simple. Get it to the personal. How far is your drive time? What would you do if you could ride rail?”

The value of a simple and effective slogan is fairly straightforward. It brands the campaign, lends itself easily to reproduction in signage, paraphernalia, rhetoric, and media, and sticks with voters. Examples of slogans and themes used in other transit referenda, compiled by the Center for Transportation Excellence, are below:

A slogan or central theme, of course, is just a beginning. The success of educating and persuading voters depends on communicating the benefits of a project and responding effectively to critics. And it relies
on reaching the right people and ensuring that they go to the polls on election day. The following sections deal with the lessons learned in Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis in doing so.

**Expanding the Themes**

Laying the groundwork for a successful rail referendum often involves educating the public about a mode of transit with which they likely have a limited understanding. Leaders of the campaign must convince voters that the project provides benefits that are worth its substantial cost. Doing so requires a balance between communicating realistic expectations about the effects of rail transit and connecting the project to a broad and inspiring regional vision.

We know that rail is not a panacea for a city or region’s ability to deal with congestion, pollution, or workforce mobility. We also know that transit, like roads, parking, and other elements of transportation networks, rarely “pays for itself,” that it involves large up-front capital expenditures and generates revenues which do not match its operating costs. But we also know that excellent rail networks—when well-designed, successfully integrated with other transportation modes, and efficiently operated—can provide residents with additional choices about the way they move around cities and regions, can foster high-quality place-making, and can shape some land use patterns in fairly significant ways.

How have campaign leaders in Phoenix, Honolulu, and St. Louis effectively communicated the benefits of rail transit in ways that are both realistic and inspiring? The key lessons learned from these campaigns fall into three categories. First, they utilized the expertise of planners and transportation experts to educate coalition members and the public. Second, they were able to cite examples from similar cities and regions in which rail transit had been demonstrably successful. And third, they enabled citizens to clearly visualize the impact of the system.

**Relying on Experts**

Staff members from local planning and transportation departments, as well from other offices within local governments, are sometimes restricted in their ability to formally endorse a particular ballot measure. They are, however, indispensable in providing information about a project which forms common points of reference and which may clear up popular misconceptions. Ideally, they function as objective and credible experts on whom campaign leaders can rely for data, forecasts, and context about the project.

In Phoenix, local experts trained the Transit 2000 Steering Committee through orientation sessions which imparted talking points which members used when speaking to neighborhood organizations, civic groups, and in other public settings. Notably, these sessions helped the committee understand the challenges and best practices of conveying technical and often complicated data to a general audience. As committee member Gene Blue recalled: “Any time you’re dealing with technical information…the general population is not versed in that type of information. So we had to break it down and make it in layman’s terms as much as we could. It was a bit of a challenge, but I admire the expertise, patience, and presentation skills of the planning staff because they made sure that the public received the information and, to the best of our ability, understood it.”
Likewise, in Honolulu, the Department of Transportation Services participated actively in the education campaign leading up to the Oahu rail referendum. The department’s director, Wayne Yoshioka, wanted to ensure that discussion about the proposed project involved an accurate assessment of the facts. “There was so much misinformation being put out there on the street,” he said. “We stepped up our information campaign to make sure that whoever was going to weigh in on the voters’ side of this was at least doing it with the perspective of correct information. But we provided factual information only.” This information supplemented Go Rail Go’s advocacy campaign.

In short, careful coordination and partnership with local agencies can ensure that campaign leaders have credible data about their current transportation network, the anticipated costs and benefits of the project associated with the referendum, and an improved understanding about effective ways to simplify and qualify data when communicating with voters.

**Referencing Successful Examples from Other Cities**

When voters are confronted with the introduction of a new transit technology, they are likely to ask, “Will this work here?” Forecasts, projections, impact analyses, and other studies may convince experts of a project’s local viability, but they are difficult tools to use for popular persuasion. Pointing to other cities and regions which have successfully implemented rail transit and with which local voters are likely to be familiar is an effective means of overcoming skepticism.

Leaders of the Phoenix campaign utilized this strategically aggressively. Representatives from neighborhood associations and members of the steering committee conducted several visits to similar cities, including Salt Lake City, Denver, and Dallas, where light rail routes had recently been established. As Jack Tevlin, the deputy city manager, recalled about these visits: “We stepped back and let them talk to neighborhood people from those cities and business leaders from those cities. And it was very effective...because they came back and they became advocates and talked to people about what they had seen themselves in these cities that were similar to Phoenix.”

These delegates returned to Phoenix and were able to speak credibly about the success of these systems, and to convince others that Phoenix had the same potential. They could tout the healthy ridership figures, positive effects on neighborhoods and businesses, and increased transportation options that they observed first-hand through their site visits. Likewise, they were able to demonstrate the encouraging “ripple effects” produced by rail transit: “We showed that development on the rail line increased rather than decreased once it was in place,” said Gene Blue.

Clearly, the success of the LYNX starter segment in Charlotte is a valuable reference point for advocates of rail transit in the Triangle area. So too is the establishment of effective systems in Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, and Minneapolis, four cities characterized by the same type of outward expansion and rapid growth as Orange, Durham, and Wake Counties. Highlighting the similarities between these areas and the high value placed in these communities on their rail systems will be a crucial selling point leading up to the November 2011 vote.
Visualizing the Investment

Since, in transit tax referenda, voters are being asked to fund a portion of costs directly from their own wallets, it is entirely reasonable for them to want to know, “What’s in it for me?” The more information campaign leaders and planners can provide to the public, the more effective the answer to this question will be. Allowing the public to see what the system will look like will enable them to evaluate its benefits and hold decision-makers accountable for a final product.

The inability to provide this concrete information has been perceived as a difficulty in the St. Louis campaigns, according to Tom Shrout. “One of the problems Metro has here is that they cannot tell you ‘if you vote for this, we are going to build this particular light rail line,’ and that’s a weakness of our campaign.” The less tangible the investment seems, the more difficult it is to convince the electorate of its worth. In preparation for Proposition A, the campaign made every effort to include the most current information about rail expansions whenever possible.

Leaders in Phoenix, in addition to making maps of the proposed system—both its early starter segment and planned future expansions—widely available to the public in advance of the election, devised a novel and effective strategy for election day as well. They were able to include a map of the rail system on the ballot itself, so voters could make a direct link between a supportive vote and the expected result. “That was an absolute coup,” remarked Brian Rasmussen. “That was genius. If you can show them on a map, what’s in for me, slam dunk.” Skip Rimscza, the mayor of Phoenix at the time, noted the importance of this inclusion in promoting transparency and accountability:

“Your opponents have one big arrow in their quiver, and that’s that the elected officials will end up raiding those funds and you’ll never get your improvement. We were able to respond to that and extinguish that quite easily, by saying, ‘Look, it’s on the ballot. The mayor and the council cannot change it. People today are visual. Every human being I know did the same thing [with the ballot]. They looked to see what was going on around their house. And that was a precipitator to their vote. So that was a foundational issue, how we ballotized it.”

Differences in state and local election laws may make including such a visual component on the ballot itself infeasible, but the point remains clear: people need to understand, as unequivocally as possible, the location and timing of the routes being funded by their vote. They should be able to visualize the effect of the tax increase, so to speak, in their own backyard.
To the extent possible, voters should be able to get a tangible sense of what rail transit itself looks like in practice. Leaders should make every effort to familiarize the public with the appearance of the technology, the forthcoming changes in streetscapes, and potential development around proposed stations. Here are some examples of effective ways to provide these images:

- Acquire a prototype of a light rail car and place it on display in a prominent area shopping center for a few weeks. Allow the public to walk through it and to embrace its modernity, capacity, and cleanliness.
- Provide before-and-after snapshots of successful stations in other rail systems. Or use Photoshop to “draw” the foreseen changes in to areas around planned stations in the Triangle area with which voters will be readily familiar.
- Produce and disseminate a video of a typical rail trip in a similar system. Highlight the ease of accessing amenities, paying fares, utilizing in-vehicle time, etc.

Likewise, the benefits of the system should be made apparent even to those who are unlikely to use it directly. Campaign advertisements, for example, might feature testimonials from service-sector employees, health care professionals, and others on whom the community relies every day about how expanded transit options would make it easier to commute to and from work. Brian Rasmussen, an advertising professional, also noted two ways to communicate the benefits of even modest reductions in congestion. Although these examples are taken from Salt Lake City, they were applicable to all the elections he has worked on, including Honolulu and St. Louis.

- “If you are going to work or commuting on a Columbus Day or a Veterans Day when the federal government has a holiday, and you know how easy it is to commute on those days, that’s about a 3-5% decrease. And people start to understand. It’s not like we have to take 20% of the cars off the road. Even 3% makes a huge difference.”
- He also recalled a particularly effective commercial which personalized the effects even further: “My favorite TV spot that we’ve ever produced was a guy in a ‘56 Ford convertible and the music is ‘King of the Road’…and we had visuals that said ‘VTA takes 81,000 cars off the road every day. That’s equivalent to three lanes of bumper to bumper traffic…in a 40-mile span.’ Because that’s what we figured out. We did the math. And when we aired that spot, the white collar male who never gets on the system, who doesn’t care about the system, who maybe even doesn’t even want his tax dollars going towards the system got it and realized, ‘Okay, even if I don’t ride it, I’m benefitting from it. Because that’s how many cars are out of my way.’”

A final selling point of transit expansion, and the development of new rail routes in particular, is its ability to provide new jobs. This argument appeals to both constituents across the political spectrum, and in Honolulu—where leaders estimated that the construction of the Oahu elevated rail would create between 10,000 and 11,000 local jobs—it was particularly resonant. As Justin Fanslau, the campaign manager for Go Rail Go, reflected: “You have a family member that’s in one of the unions. You have someone sitting on the bench at the union who, if we built the rail, could go to work tomorrow. The messaging became, if we build it, 10,000 jobs, several hundred million dollars going back into the economy.”
**Getting the Message Out**

As with any political campaign, reaching voters in a variety of ways is critical to ensuring their support and their participation in the election. Advertising, grassroots organization, and public outreach must be coordinated, communicating the campaign themes in a consistent way but also assuring that the message is attractive to voters with a variety of priorities. This section provides an overview of how messages were delivered in Phoenix, Honolulu, and St. Louis.

The key takeaways in disseminating the themes in these campaigns are threefold. First, the proposed investment must have wide community buy-in, forged through utilizing coalition members’ networks and outreach to a broad set of stakeholders. Secondly, in the weeks leading up to the election, a focused door-to-door campaign is critical in reaching targeted households and expanding voter turnout. Finally, the use of a variety of media helps to brand the campaign and remind a general audience about the benefits of the rail project.

**Community-Based Outreach**

The value of bringing leaders from a wide range or organizations and backgrounds lies in their ability to communicate effectively with members of their “base.” In an aggregate sense, providing outlets for leaders of the campaign to interact with the public allows the campaign to address concerns of various audiences directly and to ensure that these various bases have the opportunity to be heard. Be they neighborhood, business, environmental, labor, faith-based, or other types of organizations, reaching out to them in a spirit of partnership will help to foster a sense of buy-in at a variety of levels.

In Phoenix, members of the Transit 2000 Steering Committee, after being trained by local agencies and experts, attended meetings of neighborhood and civic groups to educate them about the plan and to understand more fully the ways in which these groups perceived it. These meetings gave leaders an opportunity to respond to concerns, clear up misinformation, open lines of communication, and broaden the network of support. “More and more folks were encouraged to come to the table with their questions, with their observations, with their concerns, and they were dealt with effectively and in detail,” said Gene Blue. “It was an elevation of the issue and its impact whether you were on the light rail route or not. The public input really drove the support for the initiative.”

Since the defeat of Proposition M in St. Louis County in 2008, leaders have been more conscious about their communication with community organizations. Nancy Cross, a local labor organization leader, speaks regularly to union members and to congregations of large African-American churches. “This time we’ve done a lot better job educating people on this,” she said, “based on a lot more engagement, going out into the community. This time we’re not taking these groups for granted.”

Every region, including the Triangle, has large and powerful identity groups who are active in local issues. A key component in enlisting their support, these elections tell us, is ensuring that they are at the table regularly, that they have “skin in the game” through addressing their concerns and feedback honestly, and that they recognize the broad appeal and benefits of rail projects and transit expansions.
Reaching Individual Households

Every political campaign relies on contacts with individuals to ensure that they are aware of the issues at stake, are exposed to the message, and compelled to participate on election day. Obviously, strategies for connecting with individuals may vary according to other issues on the ballot, as discussed in the “Other Issues” section at the end of this report. But without exception, reaching individual households by such means as surveys, direct mail (or e-mail), robo-calls, and door-to-door canvassing was regarded by leaders of campaigns in Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis as a critical element in messaging the merits and importance of their projects.

Because campaign funds are limited, it is important to prioritize reaching individuals and households who are most likely to support a particular initiative. Doing so, of course, requires an understanding of who and where these households are. While this analysis may ultimately fall on the shoulders of political consultants or demographic experts, campaign leaders and coalition members generally have large amounts of valuable data and networks at their disposal.

In St. Louis, for example, Hazel Erby, the current president of the county council, utilized a simple “e-blast” to her supporters to reach hundreds of people with the click of a mouse: “The e-blast I did was just amazing. I might have sent it to about 100 people, and I have friends who have their own lists. And it was amazing because the day that I sent the e-blast, the next morning when I went to my computer...here were all these responses—I guess there were about four pages—of people saying, ‘Thank you so much. I didn’t know what was on the ballot.’” Tom Shrout from Citizens for Modern Transit also noted that the importance of direct postal mailings and volunteer-staffed phone banking to reach individual households considered likely voters—largely African-American and transit-dependent—from analyses of previous elections.

In Phoenix, leaders were able to analyze the likelihood of support for Transit 2000 based on survey results. Some of these surveys (approximately 48,000, to ensure that the responses constituted a broad consensus) were conducted by phone, and others (approximately 3,600) were attached to water bills. The results allowed leaders both to argue credibly that light rail enjoyed widespread support from the public and to effectively tailor campaign efforts into strategically reaching supportive voters.
In Honolulu, campaign leaders had an aggressive door-to-door canvassing strategy that had quantitative and qualitative targets. Consultant Brian Rasmussen said, “We had a grassroots campaign that was out going door-to-door based on information gathered from previous elections about who were the most likely voters. It was information we had received from state legislature campaigns.” Additionally, the campaign conducted a poll to identify common characteristics of supporters. Campaign manager Justin Fanslau noted, “It became a scientific equation about how many doors we needed to knock on before we know we have a victory.” The effort hinged on the quality of data that organizers had and their systematic ability to manage volunteers and staff, both in educating them about which doors to knock on and what to say to people who answered.

Campaign leaders must utilize the best available data in identifying which voters to target in this expensive and labor-intensive aspect of advocating a rail referendum. Doing so involves understanding local demographics and electoral histories, engaging geographical areas which may stand to benefit the most from the proposes project, and getting prominent people—business, labor, political, and organizational leaders—to commit to contacting their networks effectively and assertively.

These direct contact strategies also involve recruiting and managing volunteers. While this issue was not a recurring theme in the reflections of leaders interviewed, it is certainly important to mention that volunteers are a critical component of campaign efforts. Dennis Callan from Stop Rail Now, for example, noted the inability to galvanize critical numbers of volunteers as a major weakness in his opposition to the Oahu rail referendum. The Center for Transportation Excellence, in “Building Communities Through Public Transportation: A Guide for Successful Transit Initiatives,” has provided some helpful guidelines and best practices for maximizing the time and efforts of volunteers.

*Using a Variety of Media Effectively*

The use of various forms of mass media is, of course, a time-tested way of “branding” an election campaign. Any campaign will necessarily rely heavily on design and advertising experts with the development of websites, advertisements, and the like, and therefore it is well beyond the scope of this report to recommend a particular media strategy to leaders of the Triangle referendum. A few reflections from Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis may be instructive. Additionally, “Building Communities Through Public Transportation,” referenced above, has some excellent suggestions for specific elements of media engagement.

A media campaign for a referendum dealing with rail transit must be tailored, both in tenor and execution, to the particular set of circumstances surrounding the election. In the campaign for Proposition A in St. Louis, leaders produced a suite of television and radio commercials featuring testimonials of riders wishing to see a MetroLink expansion, focusing on the need for greater connectivity and transit options and ending with their slogan, “Some of us ride it; all of us need it.” Another more innovative example is the Salt Lake City commercial referenced by Brian Rasmussen and described in the
“messaging” section on page 15. Both spots are designed to create a broad appeal for the benefits of rail transit.

An effective website is crucial for a campaign, serving as a “one stop shop” for those who might wish to get information and news about the ballot issue, volunteer, or donate funds. Websites should be structured in a way that makes them easy to navigate, modern in appearance, laden with promotional materials (brochures, advertisements, etc.), and capable of serving a variety of functions, including accepting donations, capturing and storing visitor information, and the like. Examples of websites used during campaigns in Honolulu and St. Louis can be found at www.gorailgo.org and www.moremetrolink.com.

The use of social media is now a necessity in campaigning. Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking outlets are user-friendly and effective ways to reach younger voters and growing numbers of older ones. In St. Louis, students at Washington University created a Facebook page for Citizens for Modern Transit (which as of this writing has 324 “members,” or fans). Its “Wall,” or news feed, boasts new endorsements, encourages ways to demonstrate support, and solicits volunteers.

In Honolulu, We Will Ride, a group founded by college students, established a Facebook page (402 members) which provided similar updates. One of its creators, Tyler Dos Santos-Tam, described its purpose as “market[ing] [the rail project] to people of our generation.” Its “Photos” section features students holding “We Will Ride” placards in various places throughout Honolulu and providing explanatory captions. For example, one woman is holding her placard in a parking lot, with a caption that reads, “We Will Ride because Honolulu parking rates are already the ninth-highest in the U.S. and continue to climb.”

Networking sites require minimal setup and allow a campaign to disseminate information quickly and in a centralized manner. They are increasingly vital ways to enlist the support of younger and expanding audiences. The We Will Ride site was one example of one of campaign manager Justin Fanslau’s goals to make the campaign “viral...new, and cool.”
Laying the Foundation for a Successful Rail Referendum Campaign

DEALING WITH CRITICS: KEY LESSONS LEARNED
1. Be judicious in what numbers (forecasts, costs, etc.) you cite.
2. Capitalize on the strengths of your coalition and message.
3. Stay on message.
4. Defend the rail project against alternatives.

RESPONDING TO CRITICS
Campaigns are not a one-sided discourse. No ballot measure is universally appealing, and the competition for popular support is often contentious. A rail campaign, like any political exercise, is a contest of ideas, rhetoric, and tactics, and successfully responding to critics requires preparation and discipline.

The sentiments expressed by critics to rail campaigns in St. Louis, Honolulu, and Phoenix were all very similar, according to leaders interviewed for this project. Although the contexts of their argument were somewhat different based on local issues, critics generally derided the cost of the project, questioned the need for rail technology, and contended that the introduction or expansion of rail would not significantly improve traffic congestion or environmental quality. It was considered, in their point of view, wasteful spending.

In some ways, critics have an upper hand in rail issues. Rail transit is expensive and its revenues do not match its capital or operating costs. It cannot alone eliminate congestion or pollution. A comparatively small portion of commuters will use it regularly. And terms like “wasteful spending” and “subsidy” resonate with many voters. Indeed, as Jack Tevlin, deputy city manager in Phoenix, recalled about the opposition in Phoenix:

“The opposition was pretty token, but they were very effective in that they just kept repeating the same thing over and over again. Only 1% of people are going to use this system. It does nothing to improve air quality. It does nothing to improve congestion. It doesn’t pay for itself. It’s going to run in the red. It’s going to cripple the city financially. They just saying those things over and over and over again, which is very effective.”

Another advantage critics may have is tactical. The following observation from the Center for Transportation Excellence in an instructive analysis of this advantage:

“Remember, this is not a candidate race where there is automatically a winner and loser. This is an issue specific ballot campaign, where there is merely a yes or no vote. If there is any doubt in the voter’s mind, he or she need only cast a no vote, and critics understand this. This is why critics often wait until the last few days of a campaign to make their opinions heard.”

It is incumbent upon campaign leaders to employ a positive and credible message around their rail project early and often, and to prepare proactively for the arguments and maneuvers of critical voices. The greatest advantage that supporters should have is the breadth and depth of its coalition as well as a well-delivered and positive message about a rail project that it tied to an inspiring vision for the region’s future.

It is not the purpose of this report to provide a point-by-point response to potential criticisms of a rail project. A customized strategy for the Triangle referendum must be developed in consultation with...
planners, political professionals, and other experienced experts. Additionally, the Center for Transportation Excellence, in “Building Communities Through Public Transportation,” has provided some useful talking points which might countervail some general misperceptions about rail transit (and light rail in particular), as well as a list of common institutional and individual transit critics. Instead, this section focuses on criticisms and responses experienced by leaders of the three elections studied, and particular focus has been given to issues which may closely parallel those raised in the Triangle.

The key lessons learned about responding to critics in Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis, as recalled consistently throughout interviews with campaign leaders, are essentially fourfold. First, cite numbers carefully. Secondly, use the strength of the coalition and message to pre-empt critics. Third, be sure that the message conveyed from leaders is consistent and focused. And fourth, convince voters that alternatives suggested by critics would not solve local problems as effectively as the proposed project.

**Using Numbers Judiciously**

Transit, and rail transit in particular, is a complicated enterprise. It involves complex forecasts, difficult assumptions, and many moving parts. Many of its quantitative elements—costs, job creation, ridership, etc.—are tenuous to begin with, almost meaningless when cited in isolation, and difficult for the average voter to comprehend.

A common reflection among leaders in the three areas studied was that technical information must be presented cautiously, if at all. Generally, they found that the more they relied on numbers or tried to respond to figures cited by critics (even if they knew these figures to be inaccurate), the less they controlled the message. As Justin Fanslau, campaign manager for Go Rail Go in Honolulu, said, “The opposition was focusing on the technicality, engineering, and planning piece of a project like this...and if we focused on the he said-she said, that we’d allow the opposition to run the discussion and that we’d be fostering the idea that everybody was sort of an amateur engineer or city planner, which we weren’t capable of being. And whenever that happens, we tend to lose.”

A successful strategy in these elections was to choose a small set of credible and compelling quantitative facts and to package them in a manner appealing to the lay public. For example, citing excessive commute times, which can be easily verified, highlighted the need for improved transit. In St. Louis, Citizens for Modern Transit highlights expanding ridership on MetroLink through simple graphs. In Honolulu, leaders focused on the ability of the elevate rail line to create 10,000-11,000 new jobs. Brian Rasmussen created powerful analogies to demonstrate the effects of even modest reductions in congestion (see page 15).

Although quantitative data can sometimes be powerful, using it with regularity can, as Justin Fanslau’s reflection above demonstrates, draw leaders into unnecessary and counterproductive discourse with critics. Additionally, data—under many circumstances—is simply not an effective way to persuade average voters because it is often difficult to recall. Critics, especially those from think tanks and trade organizations, are likely to cite numbers extensively. But almost unanimously, leaders of campaigns in St. Louis, Honolulu, and Phoenix recommended using them sparingly and cautiously.
Leveraging the Coalition and Staying on Message

Although critics have some potential advantage in rail campaigns, as listed above, one considerable advantage for campaign leaders—at least in two of the three cases studied—is that their critics were generally outnumbered and less organized. While they may have some institutional backing, at the local level they will likely find it extraordinarily difficult to compete with the resources and credibility that come with a successfully-organized broad coalition. Unlike fractious campaigns for elected office, rail referenda have the unique opportunity to unite a leadership network of diverse stakeholders who might often be at odds with one another. The power of that network, used correctly and conspicuously, is in itself a powerful antidote to criticism. In Phoenix and St. Louis, leaders recalled that their critics were, by and large, isolated individuals or small organizations. Jack Tevlin recalled one particular critic, whose day job was with the Arizona Department of Transportation, who formed an home-based organization called the Laissez Faire Institute. Mayor Skip Rimscza characterized Phoenix critics as “typical individuals who are ‘C.A.V.E. people’ (‘citizens against virtually everything’).” Asked about the most vocal critics to Propositions M and A in St. Louis, Tom Shrouth named a “local gadfly...whose group never meets.”

Rimscza, utilizing his political instincts, stressed the need to “pick [your] opposition,” by naming the least credible opponents possible in public and thereby channeling media attention to people who are less likely to put forth a convincing message. Jack Tevlin, recalling the opponent mentioned above, often debated him in public settings and found it easy to counter his arguments. In some instances, with the right personalities in place, such political tactics may be effective. The strategy of Phoenix leaders, including Mayor Rimscza and Deputy City Manager Jack Tevlin, of engaging critics rather aggressively seems to be regarded as more of an exception than a rule. Richard Werbel, a marketing professor at San Jose State University, noted that although the Phoenix campaign successfully engaged—and discredited—opponents such as the Laissez Faire Institute and others, the strategy has substantial risks:

“Normally, I would probably argue that getting into debates with opposition is something to avoid doing. I mean, it puts them on sort of the same platform of credibility as you. It gives them a chance to get their message out because debates tend to be publicized. They have a lot of statistics that at a minimum, can confuse the voters. But, in fact, a couple of the places that lost [transit referenda], they got involved in debates and I think the proponents tended to lose control over the message then.”

A more effective approach, according to leaders of campaigns in Honolulu and St. Louis, may be to remain less directly engaged with critics. Instead, they found great value in simply conveying their positive message and encouraging people to envision the impacts of rail in their community, and to capitalize on the fact that so many diverse organizations supported the effort. As Maeda Timson, a vice president at First Hawaii Bank and a leader for the Oahu rail campaign, recalled, she found many encounters with Honolulu critics to be akin to “chasing my tail,” and said, “You know what, let’s just focus on the merits of the project and talk about why we want it.” And Nancy Cross, a St. Louis labor
leader, noted that an improvement in the Proposition A campaign over the Proposition M campaign was a larger and more conspicuous “group of people out there speaking about it that were seen as civic and community leaders.”

Indeed, while engagement with the issues critics raised is important, and while no campaign should be disingenuous, the lesson most widely learned in these campaigns was that the credibility of a broad coalition and an inspiring message does more to discredit critics than perhaps anything else. And this lesson is certainly not limited to these three campaigns; as the Center for Transportation Excellence notes in “Building Communities Through Public Transportation,” “Some campaigns have actually had some success in NOT responding to critics, letting the facts about the benefits of public transportation speak for themselves.” Focusing on the project’s widespread support, connection to a greater vision for the area, economic stimulation, and other benefits is generally an effective way to disarm criticism.

A telling anecdote about the ways in which the benefits of a system might even eventually make converts of some critics comes from Phoenix. In September 2009, nearly a year after the initial segment of the city’s light rail route became operational, the New York Times published an article reporting on the route’s success. Among those quoted was Starlee Rhoades, the spokeswoman for the Goldwater Institute, which opposed the introduction of light rail because of its cost. Despite her vocal criticism during the campaign, she was complimentary of the system: “I’ve ridden it,” she said. “It’s good.”

**Defending a Rail Proposition Against Alternatives**

A common argument of critics of rail transit, particularly in areas not previously served by rail, is that simply expanding bus service is more efficient, less costly, and more reliable. (This argument was less common in St. Louis, where rail transit is already in place.) There are several possible retorts to this criticism; the Center for Transportation Excellence notes, for instance, that operating costs for buses are higher and less predictable and that other economic benefits from transit are more difficult to capitalize with buses than with rail. Leaders in Phoenix and Honolulu, however, responded effectively to this recurring theme of critics in their own ways.

Gene Blue, a Transit 2000 Steering Committee member, recalled that “There was considerable skepticism—really a lack of information—concerning light rail and its impact. People said, ‘We can handle the buses, but light rail is something that really we don’t need and something that’s going to be too expensive.’” The response to this skepticism from leaders of the Transit 2000 campaign, which also included expanding bus service in addition to the introduction of light rail, was two-fold. First, they stressed that rail transit was a critical part of an integrated transit system in most cities the size of Phoenix, and that without it Phoenix was lagging behind. As Jack Tevlin argued, “Phoenix was the largest big city in the United States that was missing [the rail component of that network].”

Secondly, they touted the positive effects of light rail in cities comparable to Phoenix, including Denver, Salt Lake City, Dallas, and Houston. They relied on the observations of business and neighborhood leaders they encountered during their site visits to some of these cities to convey the unique benefits of
light rail, including attraction of high ridership, positive development patterns around stations, and a modern image. Such effects would be less pronounced, they argued, by simply expanding bus service.

In Honolulu, leaders countered this argument more practically. Since a major issue for residents was traffic congestion and excessive commutes, they noted that simply expanding bus service would do little to solve this problem. Justin Fanslau articulated the typical response: “We have a great bus system, and we’d love to see it expanded. But where are they going to go? If we put more busses on the road and don’t take cars off the road, where are they going to go? They’re still going to be in the same logjam. We’re fitting 300 people in one car in rail transit, and it’s arriving every fifteen minutes.”

The details of critics’ alternatives will vary from place to place, of course. So too will the particular benefits of a proposed rail project. It is critical that leaders develop clear, concise, and compelling explanations for why the proposal on the ballot is superior to alternatives in terms of technology, costs, mobility, and the like. These comparative benefits should be presented preemptively whenever possible to demonstrate that alternatives have been thoroughly analyzed. Doing so will more likely place critics on the defensive rather than the other way around.

OTHER ISSUES TO CONSIDER

The three sections above report the main lessons offered consistently in interviews with leaders of rail-related referendum campaigns in Honolulu, Phoenix, and St. Louis County. Clearly, however, they were not the only issues addressed. Depending on their particular backgrounds and campaign roles, some interviewees provided additional reflections that, while not necessarily common themes, are certainly worth the consideration for leaders of the Triangle referendum campaign. Below are three of these themes and the key takeaways.

Timing and Circumstances Around the Election

Planning for elections in which an individual referendum is on the ballot and one in which the referendum shares a ballot with other local elections involves differences in strategies. Peter Haas, a political science professor at San Jose State University, has indicated that of the rail referenda he has studied, most of the ones that fail tend to be held during special elections. He is reluctant, however, to ascribe much significance to the finding. Discussing the results of a study at the Mineta Institute, he noted:

“What we found in our study is that every failed vote, that is the four that failed, occurred during a special election. Now that doesn’t mean that special elections doom you. Because three of our winning campaigns also occurred in special elections. So it’s just something to bear in mind. I’m not as confident in this particular finding as in the others. Nevertheless, it does bear repeating that all the failed elections occurred on a special elections date.”

Two leaders involved in the St. Louis Proposition M campaign speculated that the fact that the election was held in conjunction with the 2008 presidential election may have resulted in many voters simply voting for President and some other elected offices and neglecting to continue examining their ballot.
However, the Oahu referendum was held the same day, during an election not only featuring the presidential election but also a contentious mayoral race, and it succeeded.

Special elections have logical advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, voter turnout is demonstrably lower. According to the North Carolina State Board of Elections, voter turnout in presidential elections ranged from 31% to 37% in the state between 1988 and 2008, while turnout for elections in which a presidential candidate was not on the ballot ranged from 8% to 21% during the same period.

On the other hand, during campaigns for special elections, supporters have less competition in fund-raising and in reaching voters through education and advocacy campaigns. They also have fewer variables to account for in soliciting voter turnout, and their issue is evaluated by voters on its own terms, as opposed to being entangled with other electoral issues.

A final note on election timing and circumstances involves the likelihood of a rail-related ballot measure passing on its first attempt and how to respond if it does not. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain a passage rate for first-time transit or rail-related referenda, since the details of individual initiatives vary enough from location to location to make defining a “first-time” initiative prohibitively complicated. In Honolulu, for example, several votes related to rail have occurred over the past few decades, but the 2008 referendum was the first time that specific language was presented to the public. The question of whether or not it was a “first-time” ballot measure is not exactly straightforward.

However, we do know that there are several examples of successful referenda that were resubmitted to the public after an initial failure. Haas and Werbel, in their study mentioned at the onset of this paper, observed a number of instances in which the contents of defeated referenda were modified and resubmitted to the public, eventually resulting in passage. Phoenix is one example of this type of adjustment; the original proposal for a 0.5% sales tax increase was narrowly defeated, and leaders reduced the rate of increase to 0.4% for the successful Phoenix Transit 2000 measure. However, some circumstances may call for re-introducing the measure “as is,” as leaders were able to do effectively in St. Louis County, where Propositions M and A were identical. Deciding whether and how to re-introduce an unsuccessful ballot measure requires careful analyses of shifts in political climates, sustained buy-in among coalition members, and analysis of planning-related scenarios arising from modifications to the proposal.

Selecting and Managing Consultants

Campaign consultants play important roles in all elections, and they held important positions of leadership in all three campaigns studied for this report. From campaign management to advertising to data analysis, political consultants have a wide variety of expertise and experience to offer leaders of rail referenda. Utilizing them efficiently and operating with a sense of partnership can improve a campaign substantially.
The issue of selecting and managing consultants was addressed specifically by three participants, including the two consultants who were interviewed. Each consultant had previous experience in rail referenda and other campaigns and saw their primary responsibility and contribution through the lens of creating and sustaining a unified message for the campaign. Asked about the characteristics of the most successful partnerships and management with whom they worked, they both cited campaign leaders who respected their expertise and allowed them to use it freely. They both shared similar sentiments that although each election is different, there are underlying political and cultural forces that are consistent throughout transit referenda.

The key takeaways from these interviews with consultants and other leaders on this topic is fairly simple: select consultants with the proper experience, with working styles that fit well with the overall team, and with ample time and resources to commit to the campaign. Likewise, strong management of consultants—along with the broader coalition in general—is characterized by clearly defining roles, knowing the relative strengths of team members, and fostering accountability.

*Communicating with Property Owners Affected by Installation of the Rail Line(s)*

The construction of rail transit—and light rail in particular—is often invasive to traffic flows and access to businesses and residents. Property owners, especially business-owners dependent on foot and vehicular traffic, may be justifiably concern about the impact of a project’s installation on their viability. Although this issue was not addressed by the majority of interviewees, one business leader in Phoenix gave considerable attention to the subject, and also offered ways in which the Transit 2000 Steering Committee responded to these concerns both during and after the campaign.

The key strategies, says Diane Sherer, a steering committee member and president of the Phoenix Realtors’ Association, are communicating honestly and optimistically with these business owners and implementing strategies which foster goodwill during the construction of the project. She stressed that it was important to acknowledge that the construction of Phoenix’s light rail system would be an inconvenience, but that its completion would bring increased accessibility to their businesses.

Likewise, the transit committee in Phoenix designed programs to mitigate the impacts of the project’s construction on these businesses. “We did things like ‘Transit Tuesdays,’” she said, “and we would pick...a business along the alignment and we would offer a discount to go there and...we would subsidize that discount.” They also implemented gift certificate giveaways and other promotional activities which had the mutual effects of helping businesses and bringing greater visibility to the light rail’s progress and the amenities along its corridor.

The number and characteristics of businesses which may be affected by implementing surface-level rail transit will vary, of course, depending on the route. But it is important to reach out diligently to these
businesses and to assure them that campaign leaders recognize their inconvenience and are actively seeking to minimize it.

NOTES ON LIMITATIONS OF PROJECT

As with any project, this undertaking was beset with constraints and limitations. The first, and most glaring, is that all persons interviewed—with one exception—were champions of the referenda examined in the study. Since the purpose of the report is to provide guidance for leaders in support of the Triangle campaign, it was sensible to derive lessons primarily from those who had worked in support of similar rail-related campaigns. Likewise, they were generally easier to contact and more willing to be interviewed, since they worked in official or semi-official capacities during the campaign efforts. However, the valuable insight provided by Dennis Callan of Stop Rail Now in Honolulu suggests that this project would clearly benefit from more diverse points of view.

An additional limitation is that the lessons learned from the campaigns are entirely derivative. Although the interviews all began with a list of scripted questions, their main purpose was to allow the participants to highlight themes and reflections which they regarded as the most important. Ultimately, nearly all those leaders interviewed prioritized the themes which constitute this report. But allowing participants to effectively dictate the direction of the interview may have resulted in a less exhaustive set of recommendations than might have been available otherwise.

A third limitation is that the report does not fully account for local political, economic, and cultural nuances that were at play during the various campaigns. While every effort was made to identify and explain key players, regional context, and other issues, it is difficult—if not impossible—to truly understand all underlying electoral dynamics in places with which one is less familiar than his or her own jurisdictions.

CONCLUSION

Successful campaigns are the result of a countless number of factors, and this report is certainly a less-than-exhaustive account of everything that ensuring approval for a referendum measure entails. Other organizations and scholars have examined a variety of campaigns more extensively and have, using their ample time and resources, provided excellent analyses and guidelines with which campaign leaders should familiarize themselves. These include the Center for Transportation Excellence, the Mineta Institute, and other scholars.

Many—if not all—of these major lessons highlighted by leaders in St. Louis, Phoenix, and Honolulu, seem commonsense and straightforward. And, indeed, some have likely been systematically considered or acted upon, in one way or another, by leaders in the Triangle area. But reinforcing their importance, and understanding the ways in which they have manifested themselves successfully or unsuccessfully in various campaigns, should be instructive. Additionally, there may be some transferable coalition-building strategies, message ideas, and responses to critical voices that will be thought-provoking and beneficial.
At a minimum, this report should serve as a reminder that rail transit in the Triangle is transitioning from a planning issue to a political one. A great deal of effort at the city, county, and regional levels has gone into the feasibility and form of the project, and the challenges surmounted during those processes have been considerable. The next phase of introducing rail transit into the Triangle area now faces a new set of challenges which require new sets of skills, forceful advocacy, and thoughtful leadership to overcome.
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