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Building Support for your Library Budget:

A Recipe for Success

Peter Bromberg

My experience reinforced for me a simple but powerful truth: successful campaigns are a team sport. The participation, support, creativity, knowledge, connections, and even dissenting perspectives of so many people greatly enriched the quality and intelligence of our overall approach.

On September 12, 2016, I became the executive director of the Salt Lake City Public Library (SLCPL). One of the most immediate things I needed to address was planning for the FY18 budget. My recommended budget would need to be ready for the library board to consider in February 2017, so they could vote on it in March and we could present to the city council in April. As a member of the EveryLibrary Board, I had been involved directly and indirectly in helping libraries and citizen ballot committees mount campaigns to build support for budget-related ballot initiatives. While I did not need to bring the SLCPL budget before voters, I realized that I could use many of the EveryLibrary strategies and tactics to help build community awareness and support for my proposed budget, which would need to be approved by the city council and the mayor.

My plan to successfully build support for the budget included the following ingredients:

1. **Diagnose the need:** Develop my own understanding of what funding was needed.
2. **Learn the political landscape and build relationships:** Develop an understanding of the official budget process as well as an understanding of the who had power and influence in the process, both formally and informally.
3. **Determine what's possible:** In light of the true need and the political landscape, what budget request could I actually get passed by the board, the council, and the mayor?
4. **Develop and deliver effective messaging for a variety of audiences through multiple channels.**
5. **Activate a network of support.**

My first goal was to accurately diagnose the bright spots (what's working well), hot spots (what can work better), and gaps (what's missing) in terms of library health and operations, and then identify the corresponding budget

implications. I had studied SLCPL budgets from previous years as part of my interview preparations, so I had already identified facilities maintenance funding as a hot spot. Salt Lake City Public Library had recently opened two new branches and had a two hundred forty thousand square foot flagship location downtown that was built in 2003, as well as five other branches, including a ninety-nine year old Carnegie building and an eighty-nine year old branch. All locations had long-standing maintenance issues; however, I did not see sufficient funds in the budget for long term care of these facilities.

A significant gap in the budget, already known to the board, the mayor, and the council, was the lack of funding for the operations of the two new branches. When the branches were built, the library had enough savings to operate them for a year or two, with the agreement and understanding with city council that we would need to seek a budget increase for operational funds.

Finally, I learned that our salaries and benefits were a hotspot for staff. This was evident not only from the budget, but from the results of an annual independently administered staff engagement survey that clearly showed a high level of dissatisfaction with pay and benefits. The level of dissatisfaction was low in comparison with other measures of satisfaction across the organization, but also low in comparison to peer institutions across the country that had also participated in the survey. Most notably, our health benefits coverage for couples and families was significantly below market and acted as a barrier to employment and retention for anyone needing non-single health coverage.

After diagnosing the need, I began engaging in the next phases of the plan, which largely entailed setting up meetings with library board members, as well as city council members, key members of council and the mayor's staff, and community leaders. These meetings often served the multiple purposes of learning the political landscape, building relationships, sussing out how much of a budget increase I could reasonably ask for, and beginning to test and evaluate messaging.

In early conversations with library board members who

sat on the finance committee, I learned that the library system had not had a tax increase since 2004, and that the library tax rate had been consistently falling, having dropped from .000846 in tax year 2012 to .000700 in tax year 2016. I also learned that, politically, the culture and practice was to take “one big bite of the apple” in proposing any budget that would lead to a tax increase, and then not seek any increases for many years to come. Given the “one bite of the apple” culture and the significant funding that was needed for facilities maintenance alone, it was decided to go big and ask for a nearly \$4 million dollar increase, amounting to a nearly 24% increase in our total budget.

While we all believed that a request of this magnitude was warranted and defensible, it could still be perceived as—in the words of one long-serving city council staffer—“audacious.” In looking for ways to strategically build support for the increase, one board member suggested that we create a special “designated capital fund” for funds intended for long-term maintenance of facilities and technology. Previously, the City of Salt Lake had raised taxes for the purposes of fixing roads and then used the money for other purposes. We determined that if we created a “designated capital fund” that was protected by a policy that effectively limited our use of the funds to intended purposes, it would help convey our sincere commitment to the long term stewardship of community assets, and make any increase more palatable. Thus we decided to structure the budget request such that \$1.5 million dollars were designated for long-term capital maintenance, with another \$1.5 million designated for operations of our two newest branches.

During my initial conversations with the board finance committee and other board members, I also started planting seeds and workshopping messaging regarding the elimination of late fines. I quickly found that board members resonated with the message that late fees were inconsistent with our core value of access, as they created an inequitable barrier of service that disproportionately impacted our lower income patrons. My goal was to suss out possible support for the elimination of fines and, if the support was there, to eliminate the revenue from our proposed budget and include language supportive of eliminating barriers to access in our official budget priorities document. As the board expressed strong support for the elimination of fines, I included the idea in my

draft talking points for conversations with city council members.

Coming out of a series of meetings with the board finance committee, it was clear that we would be making a historically large request for a budget increase, and that this request would be driven by funding for 1) our two new branches 2) long term maintenance of facilities and technology, and 3) addressing deficiencies in staff pay and benefits. With the scope of the request and key priorities identified, I, along with my board president, began meeting with city council members. The city council would ultimately have to pass the library budget. As this was the first budget in 14 years that would require a tax increase, it was imperative that I understood their concerns and priorities and built strong support before officially presenting the budget in April. My goal in these meetings, therefore, was to build personal relationships with council members and begin testing out and refining our messaging to see what resonated.

I can't overstate the value of having these face-to-face meetings. Not only was I able to create valuable personal relationships and learn a great deal about what was important to each council member, I found that they were appreciative of my effort to give them an early heads up on the direction of the budget and that they were happy and willing to offer useful feedback about how to structure my messaging. In the spirit of Inspector Columbo, at the end of these meetings I would say, “there's just one more thing...” and share my rationale for eliminating late fines. Happily, I discovered that there was strong support among council members. After each meeting, I would debrief with my board president. We would reflect on what messaging seemed to resonate, what didn't, and we would make notes and revisions to our talking points. This practice of reflection and revision is absolutely key to developing an effective message. After nine meetings with city council members, and a number of other meetings with council and the mayor's staff, we had developed a pretty robust and effective message around the budget request. Another benefit of this approach was that through sheer repetition I had learned not just the messaging, but the nuances of delivering the message effectively: the pauses, the vocal variety, the laugh lines, etc. Indeed, I felt like a comedian trying out new material for months on the road in preparation for the big HBO special. So when it was time to appear before two edi-

torial boards and in front of more than 20 community groups, I was ready.

My next step was to draft a final budget request that effectively blended input from the library board finance committee, city council members, council and mayoral office staff, and, of course, the library management team. The final budget was passed by the library board with unanimous support. When I presented the official budget to the city council, they surprised me by expressing strong support for going fine-free, and requesting that the board pass a fine-free policy prior to the council taking its official vote on the budget in June. My “planting some seeds” about the idea of going fine-free took root more quickly than I had hoped! Over the next few weeks, I synthesized much of the research I had been conducting and drafted a recommendation for the library board that passed with no objections.

I now had two months before the city council would vote on our budget. A number of city council members had explicitly or implicitly stated support for the budget, and advised me to “make it easy for them” to vote yes by activating vocal support in the community. To that end, I identified the following strategies:

1. Present to the editorial boards of *The Salt Lake Tribune* and *Deseret News*, the state’s two largest newspapers.
2. Present to 15-20 local community councils and other community groups.
3. Post an FAQ budget page to answer questions and provide a deep dive into the budget.
4. Develop and distribute well-designed marketing collateral with key talking points, links to the budget FAQ, my contact information, and information about upcoming budget hearings.
5. Activate former library board members and friends to support the budget.

Over the next two months, I presented to local “community councils,” which are nonprofit quasi-governmental bodies that represent the interests of more than 20 neighborhoods. On nights when two or more community council groups were meeting simultaneously, my board president or a senior member of the library leadership team would offer a presentation on one side of the city while I presented across town. At these meetings, I would have 5-20 minutes to present some well-refined

talking points, answer questions, and distribute our information-only collateral that reinforced the three main drivers of the budget request. The public response at these presentations was universally positive, and they were often attended by city council members, who could see first-hand that there was strong support for the budget increase from our most civically-engaged residents.

In addition to our website FAQ, community presentations, and marketing collateral, I set up meetings with the editorial boards of the two local papers, *The Salt Lake Tribune* and *Deseret News*. Strategically, I considered whether it was wise to speak with the *Deseret News* editorial board, as they were much more fiscally conservative and I did not anticipate a favorable editorial. However, I put great importance on the value of transparency, and also believed that even if the discussion with the *Deseret News* editorial board did not yield a positive endorsement of our budget, it would demonstrate open and responsible management and stewardship of public funds. In the end the *Tribune* did offer an endorsement of the budget, while the *Deseret News* was less supportive. But I believe the demonstration of transparency created positive good will and helped to bolster the overall reputation of the library which had suffered from some negative press in the past.

Finally, leading up to the city council budget vote in June, our board reached out to former board members to solicit letters, phone calls, and emails in support of the budget. Likewise, the leadership of our friends group activated the friends. The city council held three budget hearings, as well as a state-mandated “Truth in Taxation” hearing. Library supporters spoke in favor of the budget at every hearing, while no one spoke against it. In June 2017, the city council voted unanimously to approve our budget and the mayor signed off to make it official soon after. One council member told me that the council had received more comments about the library budget than about any other item—and that all comments were in favor. Another council member observed that the library’s approach to the budget had become “professionalized,” and had gone from “good to great.” A third council member, referring to our approach to inform the community about the budget, simply offered, “Now that is how it’s done.”

My experience in shepherding the SLCPL budget to

approval taught me that a few basic strategies, thoughtfully and systematically employed, lead to success. My mantra through the process was, “Develop the plan, then work the plan.” I also learned the great value in continual reflection and iteration. At every step of the way I took time to reflect on what was working, what was not working, and modified my messaging and approach. It was particularly useful to engage in reflective conversation with board members and my colleagues in library administration, and journal insights and thoughts daily. Finally, my experience reinforced for me a simple but powerful truth: successful campaigns are a team sport. The participation, support, creativity, knowledge, connections, and even dissenting perspectives of so many people greatly enriched the quality and intelligence of our overall approach. Truly, the success of the campaign was directly

proportional to the number of people who were invited to be true participants and partners in the endeavor.

About the Author

Peter Bromberg has served on the EveryLibrary Board of Directors since 2014. As executive director of the Salt Lake City Public Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, he recently had success in passing a 23.3% budget increase while also eliminating all late fees. Over his 25 year career, Peter has held numerous leadership roles in state and national associations, including helping to create and launch ALA's Emerging Leaders program, and co-creating and delivering a statewide leadership institute for the Oklahoma Library Association. He can be found at peter-bromberg.com or peter.bromberg@everylibrary.org.