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Ed House
Albany Public Library

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I Was There for the Ride!!

by Ed House
Director
Albany Public Library

My tenure as OLA president has been an eye opener in many ways. In the beginning I often felt like a flea on the back of a big dog. I was there for the ride, trying to get what little I could before being scratched off. I had much to learn, but with the guidance and support of Nan Heim, our OLA lobbyist, I soon began to feel more comfortable in the legislative milieu.

One of the first things I learned was that individual members of the legislature were real people, trying to do their best for those whom they served. One of their biggest problems was that "those whom they served" were each and every one of us: individuals, interest groups, and businesses all over Oregon and even beyond our borders. Each of us had what we honestly thought were very pressing needs which should be given high priority in the legislative agenda. These groups ran the gamut from school funding and crime prevention through motorcycle helmets and race track funding.

I observed that the Legislature responded most positively to those groups who were high profile and well organized, having grassroots support and financial backing. In most ways OLA met these criteria and did very well with its request to increase the Ready to Read grant. The OLA legislative committee made sure that we were organized and had a legitimate claim for an increase in state support. Our request was tangible, and it had the interest and backing of many Oregonians. We were able to celebrate a 50 percent increase in the Ready to Read grants. Our ability to stave off a raid on the State Library's budget by the Justice Department showed how our collective resolve could pay off. Many librarians and library supporters called their legislators voicing OLA's opposition to cutting the State Library's budget. Attorney General Hardy Myers even called me, as OLA president, and apologized.

The one area in which we failed was bridge funding. We came very close to getting some type of interim funding from the legislature, ultimately falling short, but not for lack of effort. Realizing that Measure 47 would devastate many libraries, the Multnomah County Public Library Foundation and their Friends, along with representatives from library institutions, met and discussed the need for limited, one-time bridge funding from the Legislature. We were asking

for funding somewhere over the \$20 million mark to maintain library services at pre-Measure 47 levels, while vulnerable libraries went back to their local communities to seek new revenues.

Craig Berkman, of the Multnomah County Public Library Foundation and former head of the Oregon Republican Party, took up our cause and helped us rally support. He secured funds from donors to help pay for a major campaign to convince the media and the public that our cause was important. Craig, with the assistance of numerous supporters, arranged mailings, phone banks, a rally at the Capitol, and a state wide media campaign, picking up endorsements from editorial boards across the state. The highlight was a one-day blitz from Portland to Salem, Eugene, Medford, Baker City, and back to Portland. We met with news groups, editorial boards, and local friends and library supporters.

Even though we were late in the legislative process, we were given assurances by some of the legislative leadership that our cause would be addressed. However, we must reduce the amount for which we were asking. After discussions with the leadership and the governor's office, it was recommended that we ask only for the funding that would keep library doors open the same hours as they were before Measure 47. Unfortunately, many libraries had already made their cuts by curtailing book purchases and implementing other reductions just to keep their doors open. This limited the number of libraries that could be assured some funding would be provided. We were shocked and gravely disappointed when no bridge funding measure reached the floor. Apparently, in the mayhem of the last three days, with sessions lasting until the early morning hours, confusion took over and misunderstandings multiplied.

During the wee hours, one new funding bill reached the floor, and passed. This measure provided millions to support the horse racing industry, raising the ire of people in all parts of our state. A phrase originally coined by Craig Berkman, "Bucks for books, not bookies," continues to be repeated when and wherever library supporters congregate.

There was a bright side to these events. During the legislative process, OLA did make its presence felt! Legislators stated they had never seen such a huge response over library issues. The fallout from the lack of bridge funding has made a number of legislators feel they owe libraries more support in the future.

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What Happened?

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abbreviated on their signs as "NUTS," but they were enough. The increased amount in the project strengthened their anti-city and anti-tax approach, especially with over-60 voters.

Moreover, Lane County Elections had converted its computer system over the summer and was unable to supply registered voter labels until just before the absentee ballots went into the mail.


Eugene Public Library has heroic supporters. The November measure garnered 24,527 votes (or almost 10,000 more than in May) but this time it failed by 135 votes out of 49,189 cast — about one third of one percent. Again, the absentee ballots made the difference. And this City measure was the very last item on a ballot containing 20 state ballot measures, other local measures, and candidates. More than 1,800 voters failed to address it.

So what did we learn? The quality of your relationship with political leaders and the quality of their leadership are critical. As my favorite local leader says, "Just because they got elected to the City Council doesn't mean they understand politics."

Don't assume the voters will remember anything — at least anything positive — from previous planning,

research, public input, or decisions. Each time you return to an issue, you have to start from the beginning. At least in Eugene, before people are willing to hear about an issue, they have to be listened to. Never mind that their bright ideas have been rehashed repeatedly. These folks either did not notice or were not here at the time. People in Eugene do not readily accept expert opinion. You must not only ask for and consider input, but make sure to do it visibly and tell everybody repeatedly that you are!


This is not news but bears emphasis: The campaign is too late to convince anyone. Persuasion must come before a proposal makes the ballot. The measure must be straightforward and clearly defined. If an explanation is required, it is doomed. With vote-by-mail, the campaign is even more important. If you do not get all the yes votes in, your issue will be decided by those folks who have nothing to do but look at that ballot on their kitchen table for two weeks. And with current law, absentee ballots make primary and general elections into de facto vote-by-mail.

At least we don't give up. In 1998, with new City Council interest and a new city manager, we are beginning a new citizen planning committee to begin a new planning process from scratch. Stay tuned. 

I Was There

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We owe much to Nan Heim and Craig Berkman for their hard work. In the next session, OLA must clearly define its goals, submit the measures we support early, and encourage our legislative champions in their efforts. The legislative committee is already working on a legislative agenda.

With the library community speaking with one voice, we will surely gain the support we need and deserve. 

Ed House is the Director of the Albany Public Library and was the 1996-97 OLA president, during the past legislative session. Ed had the unique experience of being the only OLA president so far to be involved in flying (in a private plane) to several press conferences around the state in one day!