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Washington's Affordable Housing Property-Tax Levies: Lessons from the Campaigns

Anna Barcus

University of Puget Sound 2019 Summer Research

In recent years, the City of Tacoma has experienced significant growth and development – Pierce County ranks 26th among the nation’s fastest growing counties.¹ In 2017 alone, over 17,000 more people arrived in the county than in 2016. Specifically, home values nearly doubled and the cost of rental homes increased by nearly 40 percent since 1990 – costs which have accelerated in recent years.² Today, nearly 33,000 households in Tacoma spend at least 30 percent of their income on housing costs each month. Other communities around the state of Washington have faced similar challenges in housing affordability. One potential solution these struggling communities have at their disposal are property-tax levies. A property-tax levy involves an amount of money that is collected against taxable property and enters a housing trust fund, which is then used to fund affordable housing projects. Washington law requires citizens to renew tax levies via a public vote every several years. In 1995, the state of Washington authorized cities, towns, and counties to impose a property tax levy up to fifty cents per one-thousand dollars of assessed property value for up to ten consecutive years through House Bill 2263. Before a property-tax levy can appear on a public ballot, the town, city, or county must first declare an affordable housing emergency.³ Tacoma has attempted to institute a property-tax levy for affordable housing in 2001 and 2005 but has failed in both cases.

Several affordable housing professionals throughout Tacoma offered their insight in confidentiality on why they believe Tacoma is facing challenges to implement its own property-tax levy for affordable housing. First, there is a lack of understanding of the affordability crisis in Tacoma, as the city is considered a cheaper alternative to Seattle. Tacoma citizens tend to be less

¹ Matt Driscoll, “Growth in Tacoma isn’t going to stop – so let’s plan for it,” *News Tribune*, March 27, 2018.

² *Affordable Housing Action Strategy*. City of Tacoma, September 2019, <https://cms.cityoftacoma.org/cedd/housing/affordablehousingactionstrategy.pdf>.

³ RCW 84.52.105 <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=84.52.105>.

informed on the benefits of a property-tax levy. Additionally, citizens may be unwilling to use their own tax-dollars to support affordable housing in the community, as some believe that it is the property developers' responsibility to contribute their fair share. Finally, policy-makers have achieved little success in articulating how tax revenue would be spent on affordable housing, as housing affordability is a long-term endeavor and it is difficult to show immediate results.

The City of Tacoma came out with an Affordable Housing Action Strategy in September of 2018 to address the city's housing affordability issues.⁴ The strategy suggested that the city implement its own affordable housing property-tax levy. Given Tacoma's past failures and collection of existing challenges noted above, it is important to ask: what makes affordable housing-tax levy campaigns successful? To help answer this question, this research looks at successful campaigns in Seattle, Bellingham, and Vancouver, as well as an unsuccessful campaign in Jefferson County.

Seattle, Washington

Seattle has one of the longest and most robust histories of affordable housing policies and levies throughout the state of Washington. In 1981, Seattle implemented a bond designed specifically to develop affordable apartments for senior citizens. This bond achieved a great deal of success and created opportunities for future affordable housing funding mechanisms.⁵ By 1986, Seattle Mayor Charles Royer prompted the City Council to ask Seattle voters for approval

⁴ *Affordable Housing Action Strategy*. City of Tacoma, September 2019, <https://cms.cityoftacoma.org/cedd/housing/affordablehousingactionstrategy.pdf>.

⁵ Michael Anderson, "Building on Three Decades of Investment: Seattle Voters to Consider \$290 Million Housing Levy," *Housing Trust Fund Project*, 2016, <https://housingtrustfundproject.org/building-on-three-decades-of-investment-seattle-voters-to-consider-290-million-housing-levy/>.

of a \$58 million levy to finance housing projects around the city on the September primary-election ballot. Mayor Royer cited a need for new locally-sourced options throughout Seattle as federal housing assistance to Seattle had recently plummeted from \$42 million to \$3 million over a six-year period.⁶ Additionally, Seattle started to become home to an increasing amount of mentally ill people and large unemployed families, who are unable to afford housing.

Meanwhile, Seattle lost 17 percent of its low-cost downtown housing in recent years. Before the housing levy was approved by the City Council for inclusion on the primary ballot, voters on both sides of the issue came together and shared their thoughts with the Council.⁷ Opposition to the levy cited the cost as too burdensome to property owners and explained how property developers should be the ones paying. After hearing these comments, one Seattle Councilwoman recommended trimming \$8 million off the proposed levy, which was later accepted by the Mayor. Meanwhile, the *Seattle Times* and several citizens, who wrote letters to the editor, endorsed the potential housing levy, urging the City Council to put it before voters, while simultaneously asking voters to further interrogate the levy in the future.⁸ The *Seattle Times* and *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* continuously printed articles outlining what exactly the levy could accomplish, further strengthening the public's trust in the levy's potential for Seattle.⁹

⁶ Scott Maier, "Royer to seek housing levy," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 14, 1986.

⁷ Darrell Glover, "Support for a levy to house the poor," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 5, 1986.

⁸ "Housing levy – ask 'tough questions'; answer with yes vote," *The Seattle Times*, June 19, 1986; Lucy Steers and Mary Coltrane, letter to the editor, *The Seattle Times*, June 23, 1986; Cora Fisher, letter to the editor, *The Seattle Times*, June 26, 1986.

⁹ David Schaefer, "Levy aims at low-income housing - \$50 million would go for 1,000 apartments," *The Seattle Times*, June 27, 1986; "Passage of housing levy seen as solid investment," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 2, 1986; Scott Maier, "Levy would provide poor with 1,000 housing units," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 12, 1986.; "For housing, art museum," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, September 14, 1986.

By July 3, 1986, the Seattle City Council agreed to put the \$50 million housing levy on the ballot for the September primary.¹⁰ At the same time, an additional levy of \$29.6 million to help finance expansions of the Seattle Art Museum was also considered. Instead of competing for public support that same year, the two levies merged together on a joint campaign called “Citizens for a Better Seattle.”¹¹ The campaign leaned primarily on art supporters for its funding and housing community activists for its grass-roots support.¹² By joining the campaigns, the campaign managers hoped to merge the two separate constituencies into one – with downtown businesses and arts fans for the museum levy, as well as social agencies and church groups for the housing levy. The common campaign theme was to “take care of cultural life” while taking “care of the disadvantaged.”¹³ Although there were benefits to merging the campaigns – such as joint endorsements and low-income housing appealing to a wider variety of voters than their blue-collar base – there was some fear that linking the museum to affordable housing would decrease support for the housing levy.¹⁴

The housing levy faced opposition, including the Shareholders of Seattle, a group of fiscal conservatives, as well as the Apartment Owners Association, who represented 830 Seattle landlords.¹⁵ The opposition believed that there was not an inherent need for more affordable housing units because of already existing high vacancy rates.¹⁶ Additionally, the opposition

¹⁰ “50 million housing measure put on ballot,” *The Seattle Times*, July 3, 1986.

¹¹ David Schaefer, “Proposed levies for housing, museum get boost,” *The Seattle Times*, May 19, 1986; David Schaefer, “Art, housing levy campaigns join,” *The Seattle Times*, July 8, 1986.

¹² Scott Maier, “Backers of housing & art levies unite,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 30, 1986.

¹³ Maier, “Backers of housing.”

¹⁴ Herb Robinson, “Common political cause – housing and art museum: unusual joining of hands,” *The Seattle Times*, September 14, 1986; John V. Fox, letter to the editor, *The Seattle Times*, August 27, 1986.

¹⁵ Deloris Tarzandeloris Tarzan Ament, “Push starts for art, shelter levies - \$80 million question on Sept. 16 ballot,” *The Seattle Times*, July 29, 1986.

¹⁶ Maier, “Backers of housing.”

believed that Seattle residents would be hard-pressed to pay for the levy in light of recent increases in garbage and sewer rates. Despite their efforts, the opposition had neither the money nor the organization to conduct a high-profile campaign against the levy.¹⁷

Despite the fact that the Seattle Times rescinded its support for the housing levy right before the election, citing lingering unanswered questions about the policy, it still passed with a majority of the public vote.¹⁸ After the levy passed and its implementation proceeded, it surpassed its initial goal of 1,000 by producing more than 1,200 affordable housing units. This success, combined with the success of the 1981 bond issue for seniors set Seattle on a path for levy renewal five times in the forthcoming years.¹⁹ The housing levy was renewed for \$59 million in 1995, \$86 million in 2002, and \$145 million in 2009.²⁰

Most recently, in late January 2016, Mayor Ed Murray of Seattle asked voters to double the existing \$145 million Seattle housing levy from 2009 upon its expiration later that year.²¹ This message came at a time of high rates of deaths of homeless individuals on the Seattle streets as well as a 19 percent spike in Seattle's homeless population between 2015 and 2016.²² These problems led to the Mayor calling the city to a state of emergency just three months prior. Meanwhile, Marty Kooistra, executive director of the Development Housing Consortium and

¹⁷ Maier, "Backers of housing."

¹⁸ "The Times' advisory ballot," *The Seattle Times*, September 14, 1986; David Shaefer, "Housing, museum levies pass – poor people closeted art to have homes by 1989," *The Seattle Times*, September 17, 1986.

¹⁹ Norman B. Rice, "Funding Affordable Housing: Seattle's \$159 Million Commitment," *Journal of Housing and Community Development* 52, no. 3 (1996): 19-22.

²⁰ Daniel Beekman, "Mayor proposes doubling size of affordable-housing levy," *The Seattle Times*, February 4, 2016.

²¹ "Murray will ask voters to double \$145 million Seattle Housing Levy," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 26, 2016.

²² Brandon Macz, "City's homeless crisis confirmed with One Night Count," *City Living Seattle*, February 4, 2016.

active participant in the 2016 campaign, noted that the city was also unsure of its recent growth and there was anxiety about what the future of the city would hold.²³ Ultimately, this meant there were doubts about the state of affordable housing in the city and citizens were unsure of how to reconcile these anxieties.

The City Council unanimously decided to put the mayor's proposal on the primary election ballot in May 2016.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Mayor kicked off the Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda, which included the housing levy among its 65 recommended strategies. The mayor, the Housing Development Consortium, and Seattle for Everyone – a coalition of affordable housing advocates and supporters – worked together to move the housing levy of 2016 into action.²⁵

In total, the Seattle housing levy campaign of 2016, Yes! For Homes, raised almost \$450,000 in cash and in-kind contributions.²⁶ Half of the contributions came from the Housing Development Consortium members, while the other half came from businesses and labor organizations.²⁷ Among the top contributors to the campaign were Vulcan Inc. – a company controlling the estate of late Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, Amazon, and the Low Income Housing Institute.²⁸ Kooistra notes that businesses tended to support such a campaign in order to ensure that their employees would have housing and that the businesses would be involved in the

²³ Marty Kooistra, telephone conversation, August 7, 2019.

²⁴ Daniel Beekman, "Seattle voters to decide \$290 million housing levy," *The Seattle Times*, May 3, 2016.

²⁵ Robin Koskey, telephone conversation, August 22, 2019.

²⁶ "Yes for Homes, 2016," Washington Public Disclosure Commission, accessed August 14, 2019, https://www.pdc.wa.gov/browse/campaign-explorer/committee?filer_id=YES%20AH%20104&election_year=2016.

²⁷ Marty Kooistra, telephone conversation.

²⁸ "Yes for Homes, 2016."

levy negotiations. Additionally, the Mayor used personal relationships with local businesses and worked to convince them to make contributions.

An advantage of Seattle's campaign in 2016 was the levy's past track record. Seattle overperformed in the past in producing affordable housing options from the levy for Seattleites. Seattle also had a history of publicizing its levy's accomplishments every year.²⁹ Right before the 2016 campaign, levy reports were revitalized to show the city what could be accomplished if the levy was renewed and doubled. The Seattle housing levy's history of success generated a strong coalition of support. The coalition was made up of a variety of actors including affordable housing developers and agencies, the Downtown Seattle Association, the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, private developers, the Seattle-King County Chamber of Commerce, and many more.³⁰ Along with a message that the levy had been successful in the past, the campaign focused its messaging on showing that the levy was a practical solution to homelessness.³¹ The campaign also successfully argued that rents had increased significantly in the city, which would ultimately price out workers who were needed in Seattle.

Seattle's progressive political climate helped propel the mayor's initiative and the housing levy. An editorial from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in July 2016 questioned whether Seattle would ever rebel and reject a large property-tax like the housing levy.³² Just a year earlier in 2015, Seattle voters passed a \$930 million levy for transportation in the face of opposition from the *Seattle Times*, the League of Women Voters, and the Municipal League – a civic

²⁹ Marty Kooistra, telephone conversation; "Levy Reports and Materials," Seattle Department of Housing," accessed August 23, 2019, <https://www.seattle.gov/housing/levy/levy-reports>.

³⁰ Robin Koskey, telephone conversation.

³¹ Robin Koskey, telephone conversation.

³² "Will Seattle voters ever rebel and reject a big property tax levy?" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 27, 2016.

organization in King County. Unlike the transportation levy, there was no significant opposition to the housing levy campaign in 2016,³³ mostly due to the levy's success track-record. In fact, only two people signed up to write the opposition statement on the voter's guide.³⁴ Kooistra noted that a lack of serious opposition might have actually slowed the campaign, as the negativity could have created a conversation in the media that would have been beneficial for the levy campaign.

On August 2, 2016, the Seattle housing levy overwhelmingly passed with 67 percent of the city's vote.³⁵ This was the largest housing levy and was passed by the largest margin in the Seattle's history.

Bellingham, Washington

The City of Bellingham's journey towards a housing levy begins with a cross-country tour. In 2006, Greg Winter, former director of the Whatcom Homeless Service Center and co-chairman of the campaign to pass Bellingham's housing levy, and his colleague took it upon themselves to look around the nation for best practices to promote affordable housing opportunities for Bellingham and Whatcom County³⁶ They brought home with them new ideas to apply to Bellingham Mayor Tim Douglas' and County Executive Pete Kremen's Countywide Housing Affordability Task Force. The task force brought forward several recommendations, including the need for a local dedicated fund for affordable housing in order to provide the financing necessary to fill funding gaps, helping to create and implement housing projects from

³³ Marty Kooistra, telephone conversation.

³⁴ Robin Koseky, telephone conversation.

³⁵ "Housing levy passes in landslide; viaduct 'promenade' buried," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 2, 2016.

³⁶ Greg Winter, telephone conversation, August 1, 2019.

federal and state assistance programs.³⁷ Another major recommendation from the report was to establish a housing property-tax levy. Unfortunately, this recommendation did not end up leading to any particular action. Four years later, the Housing Trust Fund Project director, Michael Anderson presented to Greg Winter and his colleague, motivating them to spur to action to put a housing levy on the ballot. Moving forward, a core team of about seven individuals came together in January 2012 to explore how to go about passing a housing levy in Bellingham. In April 2012, nearly 100 people rallied together to organize a large public presentation to Bellingham's city council to present their thoughts and ideas about the potential housing levy. Meanwhile, those involved directly with the campaign began to work with members of the City Council to help put the housing levy on the ballot. By June 2012, the entire city council was on board with the levy and the Bellingham Home Fund campaign was on its way to success.

There was a significant amount of initial support for the housing levy. Most notably, the housing levy was supported by the local hospital based in Bellingham. This support sent a signal to voters that housing issues are important to the community and effect a range of other issues. Additionally, Winter notes that the City of Bellingham has a considerable amount of environmentalist and conservation voters, who ended up pledging their support to the Bellingham Home Fund because of its relation to other democratic issues in the city. Right as the levy was put on the ballot, a coalition of over a dozen organizations came together to support the

³⁷ City of Bellingham and Whatcom County, Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Action Plan, <https://www.cob.org/documents/planning/boards-commissions/chat/chat-report-final-draft.pdf>.

Bellingham Home Fund, including the Opportunity Council, the Catholic Housing Services, the Whatcom Peace and Justice Center, and the Whatcom Volunteer Center.³⁸

The 2012 campaign was limited in its campaign finances. Winter notes that the ability for the campaign to raise funds was dramatically hindered by other big votes on the ballot throughout the country and state, including the presidential election as well as the legalization of marijuana and gay marriage. Many citizens who would have donated to the campaign said that they were financially tapped out of their ability to support the campaign's efforts. Fortunately, several members of the Bellingham Home Fund campaign staff agreed to work for free, which diverted a considerable amount of funding for other campaign activities. Ultimately, \$25,000 in the 2012 campaign was raised from architects, contractors, and the local hospital. While the 2012 campaign was cutting it close on funding, the 2018 levy renewal campaign found itself with nearly \$80,000. A third of this funding in 2018 was raised by three local health insurance companies, which managed three-fifths of Bellingham's care system that worked out of Medicaid. Again, this support showed voters that housing issues were a large enough problem in the community to gain support from other social organizations.

A major strength of the Bellingham Home Fund campaign was its well-equipped and diverse staff. Several staff members had worked on several political campaigns, which was an obvious advantage in navigating Bellingham's political landscape. In addition to a political-oriented staff, Michael Anderson, director of the Housing Trust Fund Project, had expertise in campaign messaging from his experience with other housing levy campaigns around Washington and the country. Having a team with a wide array of experience proved to work in the

³⁸ Michael Anderson, "Voters Say Yes to Levy, Establish Housing Trust Fund in Bellingham, Washington," *Housing Trust Fund Project*, 2013, <https://housingtrustfundproject.org/voters-in-say-yes-to-levy-establish-housing-trust-fund-in-bellingham-washington/>

campaign's favor, as different team members brought strengths to multiple avenues of the levy campaign.

Despite its initial support from a wide range of community members, Bellingham's housing levy had some opposition. The only organized opposition was with the Whatcom County Relators – a conservative organization in Northwest Washington. The Bellingham Home Fund attempted to reach out to this group but was ultimately rejected. Winter notes that the opposition campaign was not entirely effective because it was easily distracted from its own message. As a result, Winter suspects that this actually ended up aiding the campaign because it delegitimized the opposition. Alongside several letters to the editor and an opinion piece favoring the housing levy in 2012, there was only one opinion piece opposing it.³⁹ The article primarily cites the financial burden of taxing about 16,000 homes to support “less than 1,300” households.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the Whatcom County voters' pamphlet had no statement arguing against the housing levy to share with voters. By the levy renewal vote in 2018, there was no local organized opposition to the Bellingham Home Fund.

Bellingham's housing levy campaign primarily used the message that voters would want to help people.⁴¹ Research conducted by the campaign showed that the most effective messaging would be one of morals and social assistance. There were other messages that the campaign tapped into, including those that connected the housing levy towards other social issues, such as

³⁹ Ellen Posel, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, September 25, 2012; Kristin Hill, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, September 28, 2012; David Stalheim, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, October 12, 2012; David W. Finet, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, October 25, 2012; Dan Dunne, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, October 29, 2012; Ellen Posel, letter to the editor, *Bellingham Herald*, October 29, 2012; Greg Winter, “Bellingham housing levy would aid children, veterans, elderly and disabled,” *Bellingham Herald*, September 26, 2012.

⁴⁰ Jack Petree, “Effective plan, not tax increase, needed to help the homeless in Bellingham,” *Bellingham Herald*, September 27, 2012.

⁴¹ Greg Winter, telephone conversation.

public health, community economic development, and public safety. Those issues, however, were often addressed on the periphery of the overall campaign, as there were small constituencies interested in a variety of periphery issues. Moreover, the original 2012 campaign was able to gain more public support because of its relevancy. The Great Recession was taking place and the public saw its effects, especially in regard to the housing market. Additionally, stories about homelessness frequented news headlines, which provided a prime opportunity for the campaign to connect local issues to the housing levy as well as pique general interest in the campaign. The campaign also worked to actively promote the details of the spending plan to the public, as it would be advantageous for the housing levy to be as transparent as possible – giving the public the opportunity to see what the tax money would be put towards.

Along with its messaging, the campaign had comprehensive get-out-to-vote and door knocking efforts that helped the community see what kind of impact a housing levy would have on housing affordability and homelessness in Bellingham.⁴² Ultimately, the \$21 million housing levy in 2012 passed with 55.5 percent of the public vote.

Vancouver, WA

In December 2014, many families living in Courtyard Village, a notably low-income apartment complex in Vancouver, were given legal notices to vacate by the end of the month due to a remodel by new owners that would dramatically increase the rent for residents.⁴³ News of the Courtyard Apartments created a stir throughout the city, prompting community activists and organizations to step in and fight to help the families that were being forced out of their homes

⁴² Greg Winter, telephone conversation.

⁴³ Scott Hewitt, “Courtyard Village tenants told to leave by new year,” *The Columbian*, December 9, 2014.

during the holiday season.⁴⁴ This story put a new face to Vancouver's growing housing crisis and stirred the community towards practical actions to prevent another Courtyard Village instance from happening in the city. The City of Vancouver put together its Affordable Housing Task Force which helped set the stage for the city to put forward a property tax levy by opening the community up to a campaign. Despite motivation to prevent another instance like the Courtyard Village from reoccurring in the community, elected officials in the city were apprehensive, as a levy for the city's parks had previously failed.⁴⁵ To address the officials' fears, there was a large pre-campaign process to put the levy on the ballot, which included raising \$50,000 before the vote to put the levy on the ballot before the proposal even reached City Council. This helped instill a sense of optimism in the campaign and helped City Councilmembers put the levy before voters.

Putting the levy on the ballot during a presidential election year was by no means a coincidence. Campaign strategists wanted to capitalize on an election that would mobilize high turnout in the community.⁴⁶ One challenge to the timing of this levy was that it would limit volunteer and financial resources because of other congressional, legislative, local, county, and state elections that were taking place at the same time. In response to this challenge, the levy campaign, Bring Vancouver Home, got creative and looked to attain resources from allies in the community who are often not allowed to participate fully in political campaigns – such as churches and nonprofits. Additionally, the campaign targeted private donors who typically

⁴⁴ Scott Hewitt, "Courtyard Village Displacement Scrambling for solutions," *The Columbian*, December 11, 2014.

⁴⁵ Andy Silver, telephone conversation, August 14, 2019.

⁴⁶ Katie Archer, telephone conversation, August 8, 2019.

stayed out of the political process. These apolitical allies were willing to step up and assist the campaign because of its inherent nonpartisanship.

The campaign ultimately raised about \$110,000, with the majority of that raised from nonprofit partners. The largest contribution came from a property developer while the next several largest came from the healthcare industry.⁴⁷ Katie Archer, Bring Vancouver Home's campaign manager, notes that the healthcare community was prompted to take action in the campaign because of the ways in which the health community is impacted by homelessness.⁴⁸ The majority of the money raised went to door knocking efforts and television commercials.

A significant strength of the Bring Vancouver Home campaign was its diverse team with diverse expertise. Michael Anderson's experience with other housing levies around the state served as a valuable tool for campaign messaging and training for the staff and volunteers. Andy Silver, former executive director of the Council for the Homeless, provided a great deal of technical experience with affordable housing, while Katie Archer had a lot of political experience. All three of these pieces melded nicely with one another to create a dynamic, prepared team. Additionally, the campaign was staffed with two paid interns who focused primarily on door knocking, which allowed for the campaign to reach 16,000 donors prior to the election.⁴⁹ Alongside the staff, there were incredibly busy volunteers, many of whom came from the nonprofit and religious organizations.

⁴⁷ "Bring Vancouver Home, 2016," Public Disclosure Commission, accessed August 21, 2019, https://www.pdc.wa.gov/browse/campaign-explorer/committee?filer_id=BRINVH%20682&election_year=2016.

⁴⁸ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁴⁹ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

One of the major advantages of Vancouver’s housing levy campaign was a lack of strong organized opposition.⁵⁰ One reason for this lack of opposition is due to the campaigns timing – those who would typically be opposed to such a levy were putting their resources towards other campaigns, especially those associated with the Republican Party. Additionally, Archer notes that the strong advocates for the levy made it particularly difficult to oppose any solution to homelessness. The Clark County Builders Association was one group that was particularly hesitant to support the levy, but it was ultimately convinced to stay neutral.⁵¹ The only significant formal opposition to the levy was a small committee of community members. Despite this formal opposition, the committee tended to focus their arguments around conservative, anti-government rhetoric that was easily contested by using non-profits, rather than the city government, as messengers for the campaign.⁵² Additionally, this formal opposition failed because they could not offer an alternative solution to the affordable housing crisis in the city – which the majority of Vancouver agreed needed to find a solution.⁵³ Moreover, the city’s newspaper helped challenge the opposition in its support for the housing levy, as *The Columbian* featured letters to the editor and editorials endorsing the levy.⁵⁴

The Vancouver levy campaign focused its messaging around those who would be impacted by the levy, including homeless children, working families, and senior citizens.⁵⁵ One of the most successful advertisements released by the Bring Vancouver Home Campaign

⁵⁰ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁵¹ Andy Silver, telephone conversation.

⁵² Andy Silver, telephone conversation; Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁵³ Amy M.E. Fischer, “Survey: City needs housing solution,” *The Columbian*, June 14, 2016.

⁵⁴ Ceci Ryan Smith, letter to the editor, *The Columbian*, June 20, 2016; “Put Housing Tax on Ballot,” *The Columbian*, June 20, 2016; “‘Yes’ on Prop. 1 in Vancouver Tax to support affordable housing reasonable step to address homelessness,” *The Columbian*, September 25, 2016; Lauren Dake, “Within Reach?” *The Columbian*, October 2, 2016.

⁵⁵ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

included a message from an older woman, Lethene, who shared her fears of losing her home.⁵⁶ The advertisement particularly resonated with Vancouver's senior residents, which dramatically assisted the campaign, as seniors were typically the group who would be the most opposed to a housing levy.⁵⁷ Additionally, the campaign focused its message on persuading voters that those who helped build the community in Vancouver should be able to afford to live there.⁵⁸ Along with its strong value statements, the campaign spent a good portion of its time educating voters. Archer noted that a lot of the community needed to be walked through the structure and the logistics of the levy so that they would be more comfortable supporting it during the election.⁵⁹ This took a great deal of honest presentations and personal interactions between campaign members and the public. The campaign staff spent a great deal of time communicating personally with community members. Archer, the campaign manager gave presentations to every neighborhood organization in the city and other groups. From these grass-roots interactions, the public was able to understand the problem and what they could do to help. The campaign also capitalized on preexisting empirical information on homelessness in the city and it was able to turn publicly held information into persuasion tools.⁶⁰ Ultimately, the grass-roots nature of the Vancouver campaign helped to pass a \$42 million housing levy in November of 2016 with 57 percent of the public's vote.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Bring Vancouver Home, Advertisement, [http://valoconsulting.net/portfolio/graphic-design/#prettyPhoto\[gal_rel_8014\]/0/](http://valoconsulting.net/portfolio/graphic-design/#prettyPhoto[gal_rel_8014]/0/).

⁵⁷ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁵⁸ Andy Silver, telephone conversation.

⁵⁹ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁶⁰ Katie Archer, telephone conversation.

⁶¹ Patty Hastings, "Prop. 1 on track to pass," *The Columbian*, November 9, 2016.

Jefferson County, WA

Jefferson County's attempt to pass its own housing levy began with a proposal before the County Board of Commissioners in July 2017. The resolution to create the Housing Opportunity Fund – which would be funded by the property tax levy – was supported by all County Commissioners, who cited a housing crisis throughout the county. About half of all renter households in the county pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing, with nearly one-fourth of renters paying more than 50 percent.⁶² Throughout Jefferson County, there are only 600 subsidized, low-income housing units – all of which have six- to twelve-month waiting lists. The levy was initially backed primarily by Olympic Community Action Programs (OlyCAP) – a local agency that provides a wide range of services throughout Clallam and Jefferson Counties – which began efforts to pass a levy in the county. OlyCAP helped shape the overall levy project and ran its citizen campaign, Homes Now. Immediately after the housing levy was added to the November ballot, debates began, and the public expressed their concerns with this approach to addressing the affordable housing crisis in the community. The public generally agreed that there was a housing crisis, but many were not convinced that a property-tax was the best solution.⁶³ Individuals shared their thoughts, explaining that the levy felt like a Band-Aid, when there were other, more palatable solutions – such as providing jobs or deregulating affordable housing. This apprehension from the public set the stage for a very challenging campaign.

The makeup of Jefferson County, both physically and demographically were particular challenges to the Homes Now campaign. First, Jefferson County is split between rural and urban

⁶² Cyndey McFarland, “Hearing set Monday on proposed tax for affordable housing in Jefferson County,” *Peninsula Daily News*, July 23, 2017.

⁶³ Cydney McFarland, “Public debates proposed tax levy for affordable Jefferson County housing,” *Peninsula Daily News*, July 28, 2017.

areas, which meant that there was some contention on where the affordable housing assistance would go.⁶⁴ Additionally, part of rural Jefferson County has little access to a unified sewage system, meaning large multi-family apartment buildings are almost impossible. Many in the community thought that there would be more affordable housing if the sewer system was improved, rather looking to increase property taxes as a solution. Moreover, David Sullivan, Jefferson County Commissioner of District Two, noted that the Democrat and Republican divide, as well as the internal split within the Democratic party after the 2016 election, added to the misfortunes of the housing levy campaign. The local Democratic Party in Jefferson County was split between moderates and progressives, which resulted in the progressives not feeling as though the housing levy went far enough. Rather, they wanted to establish a community land trust.⁶⁵ Additionally, Jefferson County has the oldest population in the state, while affordable housing was more crucial for younger citizens in the county.⁶⁶ Ultimately, a majority of the county was unenthusiastic about the housing levy from the very beginning.

A significant challenge facing the housing levy was the lack of a spending plan to show voters how the levy money would be spent. Having the levy at the county level made it particularly difficult to generate a spending plan, as a special board to direct the funding would only be created after the levy passed.⁶⁷ Additionally, it would be overly complicated and expensive to generate the spending plan without the board, and the campaign did not have enough money to do this.⁶⁸ This meant that priorities of the levy had not been established and

⁶⁴ David Sullivan, telephone conversation.

⁶⁵ Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation.

⁶⁶ David Sullivan, telephone conversation.

⁶⁷ Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation.

⁶⁸ Deborah Pedersen, telephone conversation, August 15, 2019; David Sullivan, telephone conversation.

voters were unaware of where their additional property taxes would be going. To combat this, the levy campaign spent a great deal of time focusing on explaining the process of instating the levy to the public.⁶⁹ Deborah Pedersen, a leader in the housing levy campaign, noted that this most likely hindered the campaign because it left less time to spread the messaging to the public on *how* the levy could actually benefit the community. Ultimately, this left voters without any confidence to vote for an increase in their property taxes.

A lack of funding proved to be an issue for Jefferson County's proposed housing levy. As mentioned earlier, a lack of resources did not allow for a spending plan to be generated for the housing levy, which left voters hesitant to pledge their support. Additionally, low funds meant that there was no paid staff on the campaign, which dramatically reduced the number of people available for the campaign to reach and share their message.⁷⁰ Although donated labor was helpful throughout the campaign's efforts, it ultimately fell quite short. A political strategist told the Jefferson County levy team that the technocratic rhetoric surrounding the campaign would render it less popular among Jefferson County's voters.⁷¹ This put the campaign in an increasingly challenging position in that the campaign wanted to educate voters without sounding too formal.

Another limitation of the Jefferson County housing levy was a lack of a unified coalition. First, the campaign failed to have a message that resonated with the community. The messaging centered around a need for affordable housing to support economic development within the community – as a large portion of Jefferson County's economy is centered on the tourism

⁶⁹ Deborah Pedersen, telephone conversation.

⁷⁰ Deborah Pedersen, telephone conversation.

⁷¹ Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation.

industry.⁷² This message did not seem to resonate with community members, including local organizations. Moreover, Jefferson County’s Habitat for Humanity failed to get behind the levy. This was a problem because the campaign was unable to use Habitat for Humanity’s network.⁷³ Habitat for Humanity likely chose not to support the levy because its issue was so contested in the community. The executive director of Habitat for Humanity feared that supporting this contentious issue would alienate big donors. No other large network was available throughout Jefferson County for the levy campaign to tap into.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the Jefferson County housing campaign was the organized opposition. The first of the major tactics of the opposition were protests outside of meetings put on by Homes Now, the citizen group in favor of the housing levy.⁷⁴ The opposition attended all community meetings, arguing that there were other ways to solve the affordable housing issue in the county before looking to institute additional taxes on residents.⁷⁵ A common message from the opposition was that the levy would harm more than it would help.⁷⁶ The main individuals involved with the opposition campaign were incredibly vocal and disruptive in their attitudes and actions towards the housing levy, which invariably energized the community – particularly the Republican Party.⁷⁷ Additionally, the opposition campaign procured an analysis from OlyCAP that explained what it would take to win the campaign. Eventually, the opposition took excerpts from the document and spun them in its favor, which dramatically hurt the housing

⁷² David Sullivan, telephone conversation.

⁷³ Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation.

⁷⁴ Cydney McFarland, “Housing measure debated: More forums planned for affordable housing measure on Nov. 7 ballot,” *Peninsula Daily News*, October 6, 2017.

⁷⁵ David Sullivan, telephone conversation, August 6, 2019.

⁷⁶ Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation, August 15, 2019; David Sullivan, telephone conversation.

⁷⁷ David Sullivan, telephone conversation; Bruce Cowan, telephone conversation.

levy campaign. Moreover, the opposition suggested that Jefferson County should increase its sewer capacity so that the county could handle more multi-family apartments, which began a debate that was not favorable for the levy campaign.⁷⁸ Overall, the opposition campaign had a strong hold over the public, which severely harmed the chance to implement a housing levy. In November of 2017, Jefferson County received less than 30 percent of the public's vote and failed to pass its proposed \$14 million housing levy.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Successful and failed affordable housing property-tax levies across the state of Washington help provide insight into what it would take to pass a housing levy in the City of Tacoma. Winning campaigns have a variety of shared qualities that are not present in failed campaigns. These include a history of success, recognized need, good timing, a strong campaign team, practical messaging, adequate campaign resources, a strong coalition, and weak or nonexistent organized opposition.

An important component for a winning housing levy campaign is having a history of success for housing measures in the community. Seattle had a great deal of success and support for its 1981 bond issue for seniors, which made it possible to introduce its first housing levy in 1986. Additionally, the long history of success of previous housing levies in 1986, 1995, 2002, and 2009 instilled confidence among Seattle residents. This showed residents that Seattle was capable of producing results with its affordable housing policies, who put trust in the city to get

⁷⁸ Cydney McFarland, "Housing measure debated: More forums planned for affordable housing measure on Nov. 7 ballot," *Peninsula Daily News*, October 6, 2017.

⁷⁹ "Housing measure fails in first count of Jefferson ballots; McComas in lead," *Peninsula Daily News*, November 8, 2017.

the job done. One way to make sure that past successes are known to the public is by keeping residents informed. Before the 2016 housing levy campaign, Seattle released progress reports of its housing levy every year leading up to the election. Similar to Seattle, Bellingham had a history of success with its 2012 housing levy, which was a good talking point in the 2018 renewal campaign. Some of the main messages throughout the campaigns included restating the housing levies' track record. This kept the successes at the front of peoples' minds, making the levies an easier win in both Seattle and Bellingham.

Another winning component of the housing levy campaigns throughout Washington is the perception of need and an understanding that there is a housing problem. This is particularly visible in the case of Vancouver, as stories of homelessness and home affordability were dominating the local news. This showed members of the community that there was a crisis in the community, and it needed to be solved quickly. Thus, this situates the housing levy as a positive solution to the housing crisis. The same thing took place in Seattle, as homelessness was a highly visible issue throughout the city and citizens were anxious for a solution.

Good timing is another quality present in a variety of housing levy campaigns. Vancouver wanted to put the levy on the ballot during a high turnout election so that they could maximize voter turnout. Additionally, Vancouver policy-makers thought that putting the levy on the ballot in 2016 would ensure that the opposition would be preoccupied with its involvement with other campaigns.

Moreover, a strong campaign team is needed to secure a housing levy win. In particular, Bellingham and Vancouver demonstrated strong campaign staffs. Both were equipped with experts on affordable housing policy, political campaigners, and messaging strategists.

Bellingham in particular benefited in that many of its staff members worked at no cost, which freed up funding to go towards other campaign activities.

Practical messaging that is specific to the communities need for housing affordability is another critical component to a winning campaign. For example, Seattle noted that its most impactful messaging would be in regard to providing a solution for homelessness in the city. Bellingham focused its messaging around morals and social assistance. Vancouver chose to use messaging that explained who would be affected by the housing levy. In Vancouver's case, senior well-being and housing affordability was emphasized throughout the campaign, which proved to be beneficial in the city because seniors were projected to be opposed to the levy. Ultimately, each message was practical to the place in which it was implemented. Alternatively, Jefferson County spent the majority of its time using its messaging to focus on the mechanics of how the levy would work rather than on how the levy would affect the community. In this sense, all of its other messages failed to resonate with voters as they had in other communities.

Successful housing campaigns tended to have adequate resources for their campaign activities. Seattle's first housing campaign in 1986 was able to raise a considerable amount of money by teaming up with another art museum levy on the ballot during the same election. A considerable amount of the campaign's funding came from the wealthy art community, while a significant number of the grass-roots resources, such as volunteers, came from local organizations. Moreover, because Bellingham and Vancouver's housing levies were on the ballot during an important primary election, they had to get creative with acquiring funding because of tapped out donors throughout the community. These two campaigns looked towards donors that are usually barred from participating in the political process, such as nonprofits and churches. Additionally, these nonprofits and churches provided a great deal of personal resources, such as

door knockers and other volunteers. Jefferson County, on the other hand, struggled to get adequate resources because of a lack of a strong coalition within the community.

Strong coalitions are another critical factor in successful housing levy campaigns. Seattle had a history of successful levies, which helped build a large coalition within the Seattle community. Bellingham had as strong coalition with local organizations and the Democratic Party, which helped the campaign access voters who they normally might not be in touch with. Jefferson County had a great deal of difficulty building a coalition because it could not get its local Habitat for Humanity on board with its efforts. This prevented Jefferson County from reaching out to organizations and voters throughout the county, thus limiting its ability to form a coalition.

The final important aspect of successful affordable housing campaigns is weak or nonexistent organized opposition. Most commonly, organized opposition was unable to gain a foothold because of a lack of resources or charismatic and vocal spokespersons. Seattle had little significant organized opposition, as there was little capacity to run a functional opposition campaign. Bellingham had opposition; however, it was distracted in its messaging, thus strengthening the campaigns hand. Vancouver lacked organized opposition, which can be attributed to the timing of the campaign, as potential opposition was preoccupied with other elections throughout the year. Jefferson County, alternatively, had considerable opposition from the very beginning. The opposition formed a fairly successful campaign that generated a lot of traction within the community. The opposition and its charismatic leaders spread a considerable number of negative messages about the housing levy which ultimately energized the community with resistance to the levy.

Tacoma's Affordable Housing Action Strategy of 2018 brought forward some incredibly comprehensive solutions to Tacoma's housing crisis, including the recommendation to implement a housing levy. The prospects for the passage of an affordable housing property-tax levy in the City of Tacoma are high if the housing levy team would ensure that it has all the ingredients to a proper campaign. In particular Tacoma should focus its efforts on creating a narrative that outlines the need for a housing levy in the community to address affordable housing issues. Perhaps the narrative could address the fears of Tacoma residents losing affordable housing because of the city's growth. Additionally, Tacoma should identify local stakeholders and organizations that can help form a strong coalition for a successful campaign.

Michael Anderson, director of the Housing Trust Fund Project, noted in an interview that it was only a matter of time before the majority of communities around the state implement their own housing levies. This research further emphasizes Anderson's point, so long as Tacoma takes careful steps towards meeting a variety circumstances. Moving forward, potential research could focus on addressing the specific challenges that are unique to Tacoma in putting together a housing levy campaign. Given the right tools and techniques, Tacoma can be on its way to addressing its housing crisis more effectively.

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