

# Winning the Referendum - How We Did It

by Roger Normand

A November 6, 2018 general election ballot asked County voters to approve up to a \$65M bond to extend The Legacy Trail another eight miles to downtown Sarasota, with overpasses and amenities, and better connection to North Port. The bond would be repaid through property taxes over 20 years.



The Friends of the Legacy Trail (FLT), as the grassroots community catalyst for this initiative, is euphoric to report that 71% OF SARASOTA COUNTY VOTERS VOTED YES, winning 99% of the precincts!

How does a small group of community activists convince local governments and 417,000 residents, who tend to be tax-averse, to invest many millions of dollars to expand a multi-use trail?



*County Commissioner Meeting - February 2017*

Here's our recipe for success, backed by tens of thousands of hours of hard work over six years:

- **Recruit passionate board members.** Let each oversee one facet of the organization, turn them loose, and trust their efforts. Our eight committees:

Trail Extension, Safety, Marketing, Trail Maintenance/Enhancement, Membership, Public Meetings, Volunteers, and Information Technology.

- **Put some skin in the game.** We asked and the County Commissioners agreed to study the feasibility to extend the trail along the unused rail corridor to downtown Sarasota, provided we raise (we did) half the \$150,000 cost, demonstrating community support.
- **Grow the membership and volunteer base.** We focused on organizational growth, now with 1,000+ dues-paying members and 300+ volunteers. We gained recognition as a political force in the community, like when our supporters wore yellow FLT shirts at key County meetings.
- **Raise the organization's profile in the community.** Our Speakers Bureau delivered a five-minute "elevator" speech or longer Power Point presentation to businesses, community groups, and home owner associations. For four years, we participated in countless farmers markets, neighborhood and major events across the county like food festivals, health fairs, and business expos. We sponsored helmet-fitting giveaways for kids
- **Become a stand-alone charitable organization.** FLT started as a chapter of the Friends of Sarasota County Parks. We became an independent 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization in 2015, able to raise tax deductible contributions
- **Find friends in high places.** The County partnered with the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a nationwide organization that creates parks, to negotiate acquisition of the rail corridor. TPL brought us a strategic level of excellence, expertise, personnel, and resources. We also partnered with three prominent local area charitable foundations.
- **Establish a political action committee.** As a 501(c)(3), we were limited by law in saying VOTE YES for the referendum. TPL established a political committee with individuals from across the political spectrum who were recognized and respected in the community. They raised funds, sought endorsements, and ran the Vote Yes campaign
- **Develop a succinct, easily communicated core message.** We emphasized safety for trail users and motorists, enhanced property values and quality of life, and that funds could only be used to extend the trail and its connections.
- **Facilitate communication with volunteers and the general public.** Our [FLT web site](#), [monthly newsletter](#) and social media presence (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) offers a wealth of fresh, engaging content. Our referendum FAQ featured a map of the planned extension.

- **Engage the local news media.** We met with local print media editorial staff and columnists, receiving favorable coverage. We had many letters to the editor published. We did local radio and television interviews and panel discussions.
- **Seek political party support.** We remained bipartisan!
- **Be creative.** Our Square Foot Campaign allows individuals to “buy” a \$20 tax deductible square foot of the extension, receiving a certificate with the precise GPS coordinates of their square foot. We have raised \$64,000 from 550+ donors, demonstrating community commitment.
- **If you don’t count, you won’t count.** We discovered our old passive infrared counters were substantially under-counting. We donated new electronic counters to the County, and developed a new statistically sound algorithm to count trail usage. The County adopted our new count, a 47% increase over previous years.

We were proud recipients of the Florida Bicycle Association 2015 Trail Promoter of the Year. To our fellow trail builders, WE DID IT. YOU CAN ALSO!

In conclusion, we are extremely grateful for the overwhelming community support for trail building.



