

## Getting Out a Yes Vote on Budgets

*The New York Times*

Sunday, February 24, 2008

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In Glen Ridge, the schools superintendent and other school board members laid out coffee and doughnuts at the train station in the center of town one recent morning to talk to residents about the need for more school financing and the coming school budget election. In the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, a program called “The Voting Booth” started this year in an effort to try to get more yes votes on Election Day.

In Toms River, administrators and board members have scheduled 50 to 60 meetings to explain their budget to district voters.

Election Day is not until April 15, when voters in about 550 of the state’s 600 school districts go to the polls to cast their vote on school budgets. But with fears that many voters are not in the mood to say yes to higher spending for schools, administrators all over the state said they were doing more this year than in previous years — and started their efforts earlier — to inform citizens about the budget vote.

Everything from holding coffees to printing budget literature in Spanish is on the table to help get out the yes vote. A troubled national economy, soaring gas prices, talk of recession and a new confusing state financing formula have administrators fearful that this year’s voters will push the no lever. While 78 percent of the state’s budgets passed last year, there have been other years, particularly years when the economy was weak, that the percentage was lower. In 2006, only 53 percent of the budgets passed, and only 62 percent passed in 2003.

“This is probably the hardest time to pass a budget than any of the 15 years that I’ve been involved in education,” said Anne Einhorn, president of the school board in Cherry Hill, a district with about 11,800 students. “It’s the economy in general. It’s the gas pump, the price of a gallon of milk. The middle class is unfortunately affected deeply. People are tired. They are working hard to live in a good community, but their income isn’t keeping up with inflation. It’s easy to go to the polls and pull the no lever and say, ‘I don’t have another dime.’ ”

Dr. Daniel Fishbein, superintendent of Glen Ridge schools, agreed that while passing budgets was always a concern, there were factors this year that would make it more challenging.

“We have people who have lost their jobs because of the economy, and we are going through a reassessment,” he said. Glen Ridge is one of many communities in the state that are in the midst of a reassessment of their property values, or just completed one, and

that often means a higher property tax bill for many residents, which leaves them in no mood to approve a school budget increase.

When Glen Ridge held one of several monthly coffees at the train station this month, almost no one showed up to ask about the budget or other educational issues. School officials hoped it was not a harbinger of things to come.

Bob Salvatelli, 41, a former member of the board, was one of three who chatted with the Board of Education members that morning.

“I haven’t seen the budget, but it’s a difficult thing to do,” he said about persuading voters to vote yes. “In a town with no industry it’s hard to get people to try to pay more for school services.”

Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, agreed that in tough economic times, the only place voters could vent frustration was in school budget and school bond votes. In December, New Jersey voters said no to \$189 million in school construction projects on bond issues. Eight out of 14 districts voted yes on bonds, but less than half the \$347 million sought by districts was approved.

“If you look at budget approval ratings you see a direct correlation with approval and the national economy,” Mr. Belluscio said.

This year there is a 4 percent cap on tax levy increases. If a district goes over that cap, it must put a second question on the ballot. In the past, second questions only needed to pass by having the highest number of votes. This year for the first time, second questions must be approved by at least 60 percent of the voters. Last year, 48 percent of the 87 second questions were approved, Mr. Belluscio said. But if they had been subjected to the new rules, fewer than 25 percent would have gotten more than 60 percent of the vote.

In preparation for a tougher fight, educators are making their cases now. Administrators are prohibited from telling voters how to vote, but they can explain the budget to them. In West Windsor-Plainsboro, budgets have passed in recent years, but voter turnout remains low, said Gerri Hutner, district spokeswoman. Last year fewer than 10 percent of registered voters cast a ballot, passing the budget 1,282 to 1,015. This year along with coffees, signs and meetings with community groups, the district has put together a program called “The Voting Booth.” Each of about 50 volunteers find eight people to keep in constant touch with through the election season by phone, e-mail messages or even face-to-face meetings. The hope is each person will talk to friends and neighbors.

“We are taking a page out of the current election,” Ms. Hutner said.

Millburn is holding more open budget meetings this year. On a Sunday in January, the district held an open forum where citizens could ask questions about the budget and other education issues. “This year we intend to do a little more,” said Dr. Richard L. Brodow, the superintendent. “We try to explain that we have an obligation to this generation of

children.” Dr. Brodow also wants voters to know that with rising energy costs, double-digit increases in health care costs and state mandates, “education is no longer inexpensive.”

Last year in Millburn, a new citizens group called Advocates for Education sprung into action a few weeks before the election with fliers and calls to get out the yes vote. “We will do anything in our power to get the parent vote out,” said Sara Lazarus, a Millburn parent and one of the group’s founders.

In districts like Haddon Heights, where a school budget has not passed since the 2000-1 school year, there is an urgency to get out information about the budget and activate the yes voters, said Dr. Nancy M. Hacker, the superintendent.

Last year’s budget was defeated by 21 votes out of 785 votes. Last Election Day, the district had a science fair and provided baby-sitting. This year, the district plans another event for April 15. A recent reassessment will not help their case, Dr. Hacker said, adding that the community has “huge outrage about that.”

What educators are up against was illustrated at Cherry Hill’s school board meeting in early February. Voters have very different interests. Stuart Chaifetz, a parent and member of the Cherry Hill Special Education Alliance, got up to express concerns about special education cutbacks.

Nick Naum, 86, a Cherry Hill resident for 53 years, complained about high taxes. “I don’t want to leave Cherry Hill,” he said. Mr. Naum said he has voted no on two of the past three budgets but doesn’t know how he will vote in April. “I hate to see young people fighting the seniors,” he said. “I want some help.”