



Olympia's Parks and Sidewalks Funding Measure



Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center

Problem

Olympia, WA omitted sidewalks from city streets during two eras: a century ago, when lower-income neighborhoods were first built; and in the 1950s and '60s, when automobiles were the dominant mode of travel. The result was a lot of missing sidewalks.

In 2003 both the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee and the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee presented separate sidewalk and parks improvement plans at the same time. For a time it seemed that the two initiatives would compete for funding: How would Olympia be able to pay for two sizeable improvement programs?

Background

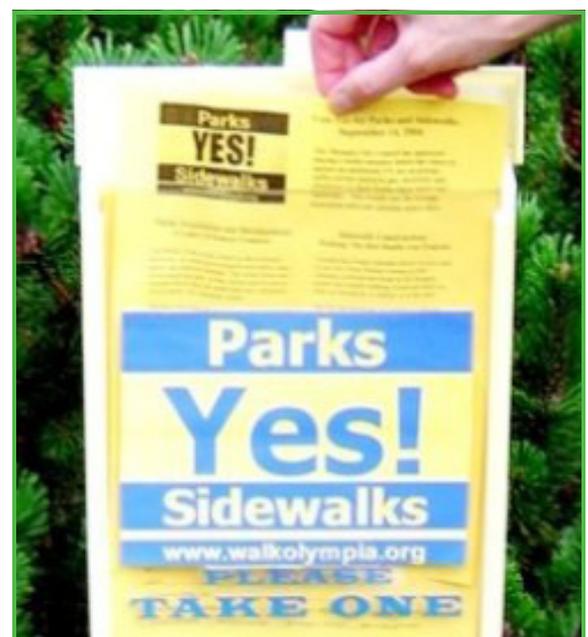
Olympia had neglected sidewalk construction for decades; the missing sidewalks made it difficult to walk to school, to the transit stop, to the store, to work, or for recreation. The city's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee worked from 1997 through 2003 to develop an inventory and rank city sidewalk needs. It was estimated that installing a sidewalk on one side of major roads in the city would cost over \$50 million. That was a lot of money for a city of 45,000 people — and more than 300 years' worth of work at the then-current funding level.

Simultaneously, the city's Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee was working on a new parks plan. It identified over \$100 million in park funding needed to serve Olympia's growing population. A walking advocate who participated in drafting the parks plan took care that walking was examined in the parks survey, which found walking to be the primary form of active recreation. The final plan included several goals and policies relating to walking.

Solution

After the city council approved both plans in late 2003, the search for a funding mechanism began. The Parks Department and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee each identified several funding options. The Parks staff requested that the city council appoint a citizen advisory group to review the parks funding options and make a recommendation to the Council. Meanwhile, sidewalk advocates had formed Walkable Olympia Neighborhoods (WON!) to lobby for including sidewalks with parks and open space funding. When WON! succeeded in getting the Council to include sidewalks in the list of projects for potential funding, the Parks staff worried that "their" funding measure was being usurped.

WON! had expected this development and began organizing. Early in the effort, a visit through Olympia by Walkable Communities guru Dan Burden (www.walkable.org) provided education, guidance, and a stimulating vision. Advocates needed to identify a constituency because there was no active walking group. To solicit interested citizens, realtor's information boxes



Realtor's information boxes were used to solicit advocates and later, to distribute campaign literature.

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were installed at key pedestrian locations in town; over 100 walkers responded. WON! asked walkers to attend the meetings of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee. At the first meeting, five members of the public were present; all were walking advocates. At the second meeting, 14 out of 15 were advocates. At the final meeting, over 30 people spoke in support of sidewalk funding.

The campaign turned a corner when the city conducted a poll to determine the level of funding voters would support. WON! succeeded at including questions in the poll, and the results were encouraging: 42 percent supported a 1 percent tax for sidewalks; 49 percent supported a 2 percent tax for parks. Fifty-seven percent supported a 3 percent tax for parks and sidewalks. Suddenly sidewalk funding was perceived as providing the margin of victory for a combined campaign. The tension between parks and sidewalk advocates evaporated.

Taking note of the unanimous support from advocates for parks, sidewalks and open space, the city council voted in July 2004 to put a 3 percent tax measure on the September ballot. The early election date helped in two ways. First, advocates were ready to begin a campaign, whereas opponents had little time to organize (for example, WON! had already planted over 100 yard signs even before the city council put the measure on the ballot). Second, summer is a great time of year to interest the public in outdoor activities and issues.

The campaign committee, Olympians for a Livable Community: Parks, Open Space, and Sidewalks (OLC), included members of the city council, the Parks Advisory Committee, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee, WON!, and other community advocates. The campaign's message emphasized three key points: "A Legacy of Natural Treasures", "A Livable Community", and "Health and Safety". These were included in all presentations and literature.

Volunteers spoke to neighborhood associations, service clubs, and other interested groups, and eventually placed 400 yard signs. In the process, OLC identified volunteers in most of the City's precincts who worked in support of the measure in each neighborhood. Politically active households donated funds; altogether the campaign raised about \$12,000.

Three different pieces of campaign literature were developed. The first was a single-sheet photocopy; 4,000 pieces were distributed from the information boxes around town. The second was a four-page color piece, with a map showing where the priority sidewalks and parks would be built. This brochure was hand-delivered in easy-to-walk precincts and mailed to the remaining voters. The third was a color super-sized postcard, mailed to female voters with good voting records just as ballots were distributed (the poll had shown that women supported the funding measure more than men).

On election night, tension rose as tabulation was delayed. The first count, which didn't appear until after 10 p.m., was 52 percent positive, rising to 54 percent by 11 p.m. The final tally, including absentee ballots, was 57.1 percent of the vote — exactly what the poll suggested could be achieved.



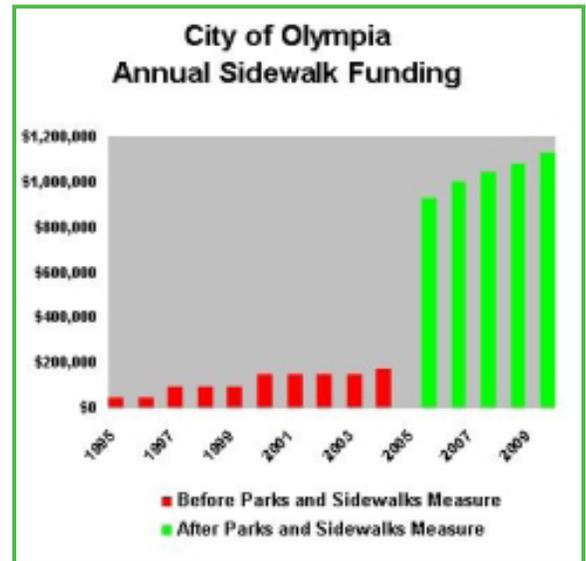
The campaign committee included members of every stakeholder group.

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Result

In September 2004 Olympia voters approved a 3 percent tax on electricity, natural gas and telephone utilities, with one third of the proceeds dedicated to sidewalk construction and the balance to parks and open space acquisition and development. The measure increased sidewalk funding from \$150,000 to \$1 million per year.

Olympia now enjoys a seven-fold increase in city sidewalk funding. The City Manager created a team of three people — a planner, an engineering designer, and a contract manager — to direct sidewalk construction. Because these are retrofit sidewalks, there are delicate negotiations with homeowners over relocation of shrubbery and other landscaping. The cost per foot ranges from \$150 to as much as \$400 in areas with difficult topography, storm water management, or right-of-way acquisition issues. Porous concrete on many sidewalks helps reduce storm water management costs. Although costs exceed estimates, revenues also run higher than originally forecast. Three years into construction, projects are generally on schedule with the most important segments being built first.



The city adopted the 'Parks and Pathways' logo for the funding measure projects. Every block of new sidewalk has a stamp in it so future walkers will associate that particular sidewalk with the funding measure. The collaborative campaign allowed both sidewalk and parks advocates to achieve their goals.

Cost

The precampaign, when WON! lobbied to have sidewalks included in the ballot measure, cost about \$5,000. That included buying the realtor boxes, printing the first 250 yard signs, and printing several thousand pieces of literature. The election campaign cost an additional \$12,000 (about \$1 per vote).

Contact

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Image sources

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For more information, please visit the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center Web site at www.walkinginfo.org.

