



What We Learned in Our Public Safety Referendum

Erik Brooks, Mayor, City of South Milwaukee

James Madlom, Partner, COO, Mueller Communications

Natalie Verette, Senior Account Executive, Mueller Communications

Editor's Note: Something unusual happened on Tuesday, November 7: Voters were asked and approved a request to increase municipal spending. Electors in the City of South Milwaukee voted two-to-one to approve an increase in the property tax levy to sustain the city's paramedic program and allow South Milwaukee to add two new police officers. Spending referenda are allowed under Wisconsin's levy limit laws, but traditionally few communities have used this tool. What are the lessons that can be learned from this case study? Here is what Mayor Erik Brooks and two leaders from Mueller Communications, South Milwaukee's partner on this work, told us.

Get Help, from the Start

Know that you don't know it all, and that you can benefit from others' experience – and their help. In South Milwaukee, we recognized early on that we could benefit from the support of a third party, and we purposely chose a public relations firm, as we approached the referendum as a communication and education campaign from day one. The city chose Mueller Communications, a well-respected and connected local public relations firm that had previously worked with a local school district on a successful referendum education campaign. This helped in two key ways.

- First, they offered us an honest, impartial view of the funding problems facing us and potential solutions. They challenged us to present the information in a simple, understandable way that would resonate with residents, reminding us that not everyone is an expert in city budgeting.
- Mueller Communications also provided another set of hands to help with the day-to-day work necessary to educate the public and get a question on the ballot. From coordinating the survey and mailings, to consulting our website content, Mueller was invaluable in taking tasks off the plates of city staff.

You Get One Chance

South Milwaukee was facing a critical, immediate need to fund paramedic services. Early on, leadership identified a referendum as a potential solution to the immediate challenge. We were also cognizant that holding referendums too

frequently could frustrate voters and undermine the credibility of elected officials.

To prevent voter fatigue, we took the time to do a comprehensive internal review of our community's needs for the next several years. Through this process we determined that hiring additional police officers would help to address a growing demand for officer time due to increases in crime and drug-related incidents including burglaries, thefts, and heroin overdoses.

It was also important to ask for a reasonable amount of money that would meet the needs of our community for the foreseeable future. The council made the decision to pursue a public safety referendum that increased annual property taxes by \$52 per year (\$35 going toward paramedics and \$17 going toward police) for every \$100,000 of property value.

Start Early, and Educate Over Time

It is important to remember the general public has limited knowledge of the budget decisions facing municipal leaders. The South Milwaukee Common Council discussed the paramedic funding challenge for several years and made budget decisions to maintain service. This deep knowledge led us to consider a referendum, and while we felt paramedic funding was a clear and compelling community need, we had to take a step back to effectively educate the community and take voters through the process, and gauge community interest.

One year before the referendum vote, the council commissioned an options assessment to outline the budget challenges facing the City, as well as the potential funding



PARAMEDIC FUNDING CHALLENGE

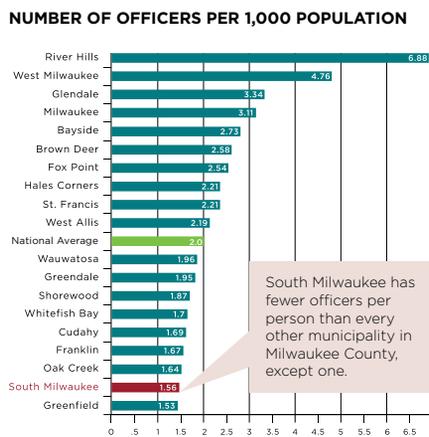
The City's paramedic service, which is provided by the fire department, has been a major asset for the community, enabling rapid-response for residents facing emergencies and medical issues. The City must take action this year to secure alternative funding that will preserve high-quality paramedic service.



POLICE SERVICES CHALLENGE

Over the past 20 years, the South Milwaukee Police Department's staffing level has decreased, despite a greater demand for officer time due to increases in crime and drug-related incidents including burglaries, thefts and heroin overdoses.

South Milwaukee is well below the local and national average for the number of officers based on population.



solutions. The options assessment was used as the basis to create a community survey, which solicited opinions from South Milwaukee residents but also served as an educational tool that was mailed to all residents in May of 2017, six months before the referendum vote. An online version was also offered. The survey results were presented at a council meeting in July, and aldermen voted in August to proceed with the referendum less than two months later.

Once the referendum was scheduled we implemented an education campaign over the course of three months consisting of direct mail, social media, a detailed website, and a series of public meetings.

Do Your Homework, and Show Your Work

Take the time to develop detailed resource materials for the public and establish a narrative that demonstrates the municipality did its due diligence before deciding to hold a referendum. For South Milwaukee, the options assessment explained the complexities of paramedic service and funding. We developed charts and graphs to complement the descriptions and show the impact of each potential solution on service levels and response times. The options assessment also documented the steps the City had already taken to cut costs

and save taxpayer dollars. We used press coverage and social media to promote the options assessment and direct residents to read it on the city website, recognizing that we would also need to simplify the information for many people who didn't want to take that deep of a dive into data.

Act on Survey Feedback

Going to referendum was never a foregone conclusion. While we were not bound by the survey results, we pledged to take them seriously and act accordingly, including potentially not moving forward on the referendum. Response was strong – more than 1,350 responded for a response rate of 14%, considered very high by experts, even though respondents were not necessarily reflective of our population (43% of respondents were 65 years or older). Results indicated strong support for a referendum, as 60% of respondents said they would support paying higher property taxes to maintain existing fire and EMS; 64% said they would support doing the same to add two new police officers. This compares to 24% support for outsourcing EMS services and 41% support for making other budget cuts and service reductions to maintain fire and EMS services. In other words, residents spoke loudly and clearly.

With these results and clear feedback, the South Milwaukee Common Council voted in August to put a referendum question on the November 7 ballot.

Speak Plainly and Clearly

After you've developed comprehensive resource materials, take the time to establish concise and consistent messages that will help the public understand the basics of the issue. Municipal officials should use those key messages to guide their conversations with constituents when explaining the referendum. We synthesized the information from the options assessment into a two-page fact sheet that covered all of the key messages. Also remember that repetition is crucial – voters need to hear the same messages over and over in order for the information to resonate. We did two direct mail pieces educating voters on the campaign, one about a month ahead of the vote, and the second a week out: Both pieces included the same key messages presented with slightly different visual layouts.

Bring the Message to the Voters - and Provide a Voice for the Community

Provide a wide range of opportunities for residents to get educated on the referendum, ask questions, and provide feedback. In addition to hosting our own information sessions, the mayor and city administrator spoke to a variety of community groups including the chamber of commerce, the lions club, and the local school board. We also used the mayor's blog and social media to share information in addition to creating a dedicated phone number and email address for residents to direct questions.

It's also important to follow a social media protocol and only respond to direct questions about the referendum on channels managed by the municipality. If you deem a response necessary, do your best to reference online informational resources for people to learn the facts. Engaging in online conversations is not a productive use of time or an effective way to share information.

Get the Details Right

The state is very prescriptive on requirements for the referendum – from key dates in the election process to what elected officials are allowed to say in discussing the issue to how the question is worded on the ballot. Encourage your clerk's office to connect early in the process with local and state elections officials to get clear on expectations and requirements. The ballot language requirements were especially frustrating. Until changes passed in the latest biennial budget, state law did not allow the city to state specifically what the referendum would fund. We feared this would create confusion for voters, making the education

campaign all the more important. One common question was, "How can we be sure the money will be used to actually fund public safety?" With that in mind, we created dedicated funds for the referendum dollars, and we promoted that fact heavily in communications materials.

Advocacy Matters

The city can only educate around the referendum. It cannot advocate. Others, however, can, and they did in South Milwaukee. A third-party advocacy group formed prior to the election, led by the state and local firefighters union. The group delivered, entirely independent of the city, a get-out-the-vote effort that included direct mail pieces, door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, and social media activation. The advocacy work was likely a significant contributing factor to the more than 28% voter turnout in a special election, much higher than initial projections, and the final 2-to-1 "yes" vote. An organized opposition group never formed.

About the authors:

Erik Brooks, Mayor, City of South Milwaukee was first elected mayor in April of 2014, and was re-elected in April of 2017. He also served as a South Milwaukee alderman from 2009 to 2014. Erik, a Marquette University graduate, is married with two children, ages 10 and 13. Contact Erik at brooks@smwi.org

James Madlom, Partner, Chief Operating Officer at Mueller Communications, manages a variety of client teams responsible for developing and implementing community relations and public affairs strategies, internal employee communications programs, crisis preparation, and marketing communications efforts for clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to government agencies and nonprofits. James earned both his bachelor's degree and law degree, magna cum laude, from Marquette University. He lives in Whitefish Bay with his wife and three children. Contact James at jmadlom@muellercommunications.com

Natalie Verette, Senior Account Executive at Mueller Communications, leads client teams to execute various communications and public affairs strategies as well as community and public awareness campaigns. She has experience in serving clients across a variety of industries including municipalities, nonprofits, school districts, and corporations. Prior to joining the firm, Natalie spent eight years as the chief of staff for a representative in the Wisconsin State Assembly. She is a graduate of Fordham University in New York City. Natalie is a Wauwatosa native and now resides in Saint Francis. Contact Natalie at nverette@muellercommunications.com