

Subject: School Election Guidance Monday, October 23, 2023
Date: 9:46:46 AM

External Email

School Election Guidance

External Email

I attended the public engagement session the Public Disclosure Commission held on Tuesday, October 17. I was there mostly to listen as we do not have any upcoming ballot measures, but I believe any decisions made by the current commission will impact school elections for years to come so I wanted to share a few concerns from a small school district in northwest Washington.

As a former journalist, I understand and appreciate the importance of transparency and accountability in public institutions. It's encouraging that the Commission is engaging with school communicators and taking our concerns into account.

The biggest request I have from the commission is that there is clear guidance on what is and isn't allowed. As communicators, we are tasked with making sure our local voters understand the tax measures (the cost per \$1,000, what that looks like for a median home in our area per month/year, and what the funds will be used for).

In our case, we try to use simple, easy-to-understand graphics to convey the costs, but folks these days expect more. I don't want to follow vague guidelines that could result in my district or me having to pay PDC fines for something I assume is 100% allowable because of misinterpretation. I want to be able to have it printed out and show it to my superintendent so I can say, "actually, we aren't allowed to do X, but we can do Y under PDC guidelines."

It is a challenging task to reach out to the community and families without a significant budget. Limiting social media communication on small, rural school districts like Sedro-Woolley would be a tough row to hoe as it's the most cost-effective way to share information with our community. In the past 28 days, for example, I have posted 65 times to Facebook and Instagram. These are the typical event reminders, photos of students excelling in academic pursuits, and more. We will be in a lose-lose situation in the future if the PDC limits the number of posts because that is our primary communication method because it doesn't cost anything other than time. Mailers are extremely expensive and most folks literally toss them in the recycle bin without reading them (I know I am guilty of this myself), making it an ineffective way to reach out to the community. Limiting the number of posts during an election cycle will put school districts in a difficult position, as it would hinder our primary communication method.

Social media is a great tool for two-way communication during levy and bond elections, and it's important to use it effectively. While it's important to respect the district's page as a neutral space, I feel like you can still post information and answer questions within reason. As for how often to post, the PDC does not have specific guidelines on this, but I typically have posted once per week to keep the school district's page as neutral as possible. Answering questions on these posts is a great way to engage with our local voters and provide them with the information they request to make an informed decision. I am careful to be transparent and accurate in my responses while avoiding language that could be interpreted as

campaigning. I am also respectful of all viewpoints, even those that disagree with the measure. The ability to clear up misconceptions through back-and-forth interactions is a valuable tool in the election process. Providing clear information on tax rates and levy lids can help voters understand the impact the measure will have on their taxes.

Many school districts struggle to find volunteers to campaign for levy and bond measures. While some dedicated individuals are willing to donate their time, they often lack the resources to fundraise to create additional mailers. This is especially true for districts like Sedro-Woolley with depressed economies. Despite the McCleary decision, many communities are still being asked to vote on funding measures to subsidize items and positions not funded by the state. For example, our district has been unable to replace an open concept school built in 1972 after three failed bond attempts. The building does not have the internal structure to hold up the external walls from collapsing during a significant earthquake. Parents are asked to send water bottles to school with their children because the pipes in this building are so rusty that the water is discolored. The same school has 37 exterior entries, which poses a safety risk in an active shooter scenario. Part of our high school, which has over 1,200 students, was constructed in 1911. The other portion in the 1950s. While we take pride in taking good care of our schools, they are worn and weary.

School district funding for new construction in Washington state can be a challenging issue to tackle. The high threshold required for approval of new bonds can be a significant barrier, making it difficult for schools to secure the necessary funds. We have come to the conclusion that before any new bond will be passed in our community, the last bond from 2010 will need to be paid off. This can be frustrating to schools and families who see the buildings and facilities that are in desperate need of replacement. We know it's key to be good stewards of our taxpayers' dollars, but it is also our responsibility to provide students with the best possible educational experience.

I would kindly request that the PDC keep in mind that most of your smaller school districts are thrilled if we can send one informational postcard out and stay within our very limited budget. Please be mindful of our budget constraints when setting guidelines for various communication channels to help us ensure voters are well-informed about ballot measures.

Ruth Richardson

Public Information Officer/Communications Specialist

Sedro-Woolley School District

801 Trail Road, Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

Phone: 360-855-3500 Direct: 360-855-3839 Fax: 360-855-3574

"Every student graduates with the knowledge and skills for future learning and success."

"We need to make the positive so loud that the negative becomes almost impossible to hear." — George Couros

Use the URL below or Reply to the ticket.

<https://wapdc.freshdesk.com/helpdesk/tickets/143606>

--