

The Long Journey to the Passing of Prop E

Presentation by Dan Flanagan

How do you capture a seven-year process, with tons of folks contributing, numerous stops and starts, and compress it into ten or so minutes? Before I start, I better tell you all what Prop E is and what it is not.

Prop E creates a dedicated “set aside” in San Francisco’s Budget of \$19,000,000 to care for all of the street trees in the city and to pay for the sidewalk damage created by trees. The Fund also sets aside \$500,000 per year for the care of trees in school yards. The fund will increase by the same percentage as the general budget increases every year. If there the budget has a greater than \$200,000,000 deficit, our fund is frozen for that year. Prop E does not raise any money for the planting of street trees.

Prop E passed in November 2016, but it was a long road to get there. How did San Francisco get from one of the most insane/inane public policies around street trees to, hopefully, to one of the better examples of how municipalities can manage their street tree population? There are four major entities that came together to make this transform San Francisco Public Tree Policy: Public Works, the Planning Department, The Urban Forest Council, and Friends of the Urban Forest, all played key roles.

Let me give you a brief timeline of what happened.

- August of 2008: I join Friends of the Urban Forest (FUF) as interim ED, then am hired as ED in August 2009
- 2009: FUF launches a Strategic Planning Process, completed in 2010
- 2011: I join The San Francisco Urban Forest Council, become chair 2012
- 2011: The Planning Department launches an Urban Forest plan, published in 2012
- 2012: we bring two opposing Supervisors together to launch an effort to revamp our public policy around street trees and to incorporate the findings of the 2012 Urban Forest Plan
- 2013: The SF Urban Forest council conducts a Strategic Planning process and endorses the 2012 Urban Forest Plan, one of its recommendations is to create a dedicated funding source for the care of all of our street trees.
- 2013: FUF hires consultants to conduct feasibility study to run a campaign, we decide it is too early
- 2015: FUF hires consultants again to run focus groups and polls to again gage feasibility of running a campaign
- 2016: FUF raises about \$700,000 to run a campaign that launches in June of 2016

Let me start with FUF’s role.

When I started at FUF I really did not know anything about street trees or public policy but I did have extensive experience in running large and small non-profits. I call myself a refugee from Wall Street. My first career was at one brokerage firm on Wall Street. After 15 years on Wall Street, the last five as chairman of what was then a relatively large brokerage firm, I escaped to the non-profit world and have never really looked back. I should have known that I would probably end up working with trees. In college, my major undertaking was to be one of five young freshmen building a treehouse that I ended up living in for part of my college education.

In 2009, FUF started a Strategic Planning process that took almost 6 months to complete. As we went through the process, it became crystal clear to me that, while FUF is beloved in San Francisco, we truly were not doing anything to fundamentally impact the San Francisco Urban Forest. Sure, we were planting anywhere from 900 to 1,100 street trees a year, but the mortality of our street tree population was probably closer to 4,000 to 4,5000. (The City of San Francisco, due to extensive and years of budget cuts were only planting about 350 trees a year).

So, we identified three major strategic goals:

- Maximize Efficiency of Greening within “The Rules of the Game”
- Change the “Rules of the Game” Through a Green Advocacy Agenda
- Build a Robust Financial and Operational Infrastructure

Each of these three elements was critical to our success.

The first thing we needed to do was build a sound financial foundation for FUF, something that I clearly did not inherit. We developed our fundraising capacity, got in touch with lapsed donors and launched a planned giving messaging campaign (which ultimately helped fund the campaign). In 2009/10 we were extraordinarily fortunate to get ARRA funding that allowed us to invest in our staff and our infrastructure.

We also desperately needed to rebuild credibility with various city departments, especially with Public Works. When I came on board, our relationship with city hall and Public Works was abysmal. I worked hard at creating a collegial relationship with Public Works, but it took time. Most importantly, we needed to ensure that our work was outstanding in planting, tree care, sidewalk gardens and education.

We hired a brilliant PR person part time to run all of our messaging, social media and help recreate our brand. Starting in late early 2010 until 2016, our messaging was consistent and compelling. The San Francisco Urban Forest was dying; we were losing more trees than we were planting. From 2009 to present, we grew the number of folks we had on our email list from about 1,000 to 19,600, and increased our Facebook and Twitter followers.

In early 2016 we were able to “weaponize” our email list. A wonderful volunteer broke down our list into supervisorial districts. This allowed us to put pressure on individual supervisors in case we needed to (which ended up being critical).

When I joined FUF in 2008, we had less than \$40,000 in the bank. In June of 2016 we had close to 2,000,000 in the bank. FUF was ready to go to battle.

Public Works and the Planning Department

When I think back on this process, it truly was a three -legged stool, Planning, Public Works and FUF. A lot of what happened has to do with the very close working relationship that the three of us developed over time. Without Carla Short, currently the Director of the Bureau of Urban Forestry and Jon Swae, Urban Planner at the Planning Department Prop E would never have seen the light of day. The three of us came first together as I became the head of the Urban Forest Council. In the end, the major work was done by FUF, Planning and Public Works. The Urban Forest Council created a working group to stay in touch with the progress of the Plan.

San Francisco had tried to write an Urban Forest plan back in 2008 but had to cancel the effort due to budget cuts. In 2011 Jon Swae picked up where we had left off in 2008 and organized a working group to help contribute to the plan. We decided to have three phases of the plan, the first would focus on street trees (gosh, I cannot imagine why that came about). The second phase will be park trees and the last phase will be green roofs, backyard trees and living walls. It was fortuitous that FUF finished our Strategic Plan the year before so we sent over a lot of our research over to Jon as he started the process. In many ways, FUF's strategic goals tracked perfectly with the some of the major goals of the Urban Forest Plan.

Jon and Carla did an enormous amount of work researching what worked and did not work in various municipal street tree programs in California and throughout the United States. We quickly came up with the decision that the Urban Forest Plan needed to recommend a fundamental change in public policy, make street trees the responsibility of the city. In order to make that feasible, we needed to create a dedicated funding source for the care of street trees. We looked at various methodologies and we finally landed on a parcel tax.

Perhaps the best thing we did was to hire Alexander Quinn from AECOM, currently at Hatch. He and his team created the financial model for what sort of money we needed to raise in order to care for all of our street trees. I cannot stress enough the importance of creating a solid financial model. Carla, Jon, Quin and I spent countless -- and I really mean countless -- hours working on this model. **In the end, the Plan became the unifying document that was the underpinning of Prop E.** We took the Plan in front of the UFC for public comment and approval. We then sent it up the Supervisors and the Mayor for approval. I spent a great deal of time in every single Supervisor's office going over the key findings of the Plan to ensure their vote. Since it did not mean actually spending any dollars, the plan was unanimously passed by the board and endorsed by the Mayor.

Politics, politics or otherwise known and sausage making

There are two ways to get on the ballot in San Francisco: get 43,800 signatures or get the majority of the Supervisors to vote it on the ballot.

I am not going to go into much detail about the crazy politics of San Francisco that directly impacted our efforts. Suffice it to say our major support on the board of Supervisors was Scott Weiner. In 2015 he announced that we would be running for State Senate. The bad news was that Jane Kim, another supervisor, decided to run as well. Therefore, we had one moderate, Scott Weiner running against a progressive, Jane Kim. And Scott's name was very closely connected to our efforts.

Before this all happened, I was able to line up six solid votes, possibly more to get on the ballot. On June 18th, we were on the agenda for the 2pm meeting to get on the ballot and I thought we had our votes. (Actually, I was planning to leave the next day on a weeklong vacation). At 10am, my sixth vote, a swing progressive that said he LOVED trees, pulled his vote. Without him, we were dead in the water. It was clearly a power play to get Scott Weiner to cave on a couple of other issues and he said no. No vacation.

The next day, Carla, Jon, our campaign consultants, and I met in Scott Weiner's office. He said that we were dead in the water unless we immediately started an intense email campaign and have key residents call and meet with the supervisors. Scott then said that he would try and get us back on the agenda for the next meeting the following Tuesday. He said without major effort to inundate the Supervisors with emails, calls and letters, we would never get on the ballot.

A year before, FUF started organizing a group of our volunteers that wanted to work on Advocacy. We had informational meetings once a month to educate what we called our "Volunteer Advocates." We had as many as 50 folks on the list but we normally would have about 20 to 25 folks at our monthly meetings. The very next day following our meeting with Scott, we activated the Volunteer Advocates. Their job was to go and meet all of the supervisors that we needed to vote for us.

Secondly, we launched an email campaign asking our members to write and/or call their supervisors (we only asked those in districts that did not support us). Lastly, we got the message out on Facebook and other social media outlets.

The day of the Supervisor's meeting, I thought we might have a hundred folks come to the meeting. **It was truly an extraordinary moment in my career to watch the hundreds of folks walking up the majestic steps inside City Hall to go to the meeting. In the end, we had well close to 400 folks in attendance.** The emails, visits and the crowd the day of the vote all combined to make it all happen.

What we did not expect was that the progressives were nervous about our proposed tax, they thought that it would take away from the other tax measures that were important to them. A compromise was reached just hours before the Board of Supervisor's meeting to turn our proposal from a parcel tax into a "set aside" which would only require 50% plus one to be successful, as opposed to 66.6% plus one. It was a great way to launch our campaign.

Post Scrip to the election.

In order for the Mayor to buy into us going from a parcel tax to a set aside, he insisted that he had the right to have what is called a “kill switch” on the proposition until December 31st 2016. Prop E was proposed to get its funding from a tax on any property in excess of \$5,000,000. This was not an “official” linkage (if it were, we would be back in the 66.6% world). The Mayor said if our real estate tax did not pass, he wanted to be able to kill Prop E. We had no choice but to go ahead.

Fast forward to November 9th. A couple of the Mayor’s key tax proposals to address homelessness failed at the ballot. Two weeks after the election, he threatened to kill Prop E in order for him to fund his priorities.

Just when you thought it was safe... still no vacation! Suffice to say, we again hit all of the supervisors and this time, aimed the majority of our efforts at the Mayor. Again, we went to our email list of 19,600 and asked them to call and or email the Mayor. I have no way of knowing exactly how many calls were made and emails but I do know that the Mayor’s office was overwhelmed. Our investment in building our email list, our Facebook and Twitter presence was, yet again, critical to our being able to pull the Mayor back from killing Prop E. It made it onto the ballot, and on November 8th 2016, we received 78.6% of the vote, or 283,000 votes.

Conclusion

If I were to capture the key underpinnings of this story, they would be (not necessarily in order of importance):

- Build a strong and successful program that give you credibility with city departments and the public
- Build financial capacity by running tight programs and strong development efforts
- Build a strong partnership with Public Works
- Invest in your brand, your social media and your messaging
- Make sure that you never get ahead of your board
- Most of all, have fun and believe in what you are doing