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PORTLAND'S CHILD LEVY PASSES, AND ACTIVISTS LOOK BEYOND CITY

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Illustration: Photo by Bruce Ely - The Oregonian

Summary: The measure, which will support prekindergarten programs, has the slimmest margin of three backed by city voters

Vote counts Wednesday pushed Portland's five-year *children's levy* over the top, giving Oregon its first money measure for prekindergarten programs and inspiring supporters who hope to export the idea down the Willamette Valley and nationwide.

The victory means Portland property owners will get a triple dose of tax increases next year. While the rest of the state was shooting down money measures, the city's voters passed the *children's levy* and a parks levy as well as providing the bulk of support for a successful Multnomah County library levy.

With a 53 percent yes vote, the *children's levy* had the slimmest winning margin of the three. Supporters credited the victory to hundreds of earnest volunteers, widespread support from religious leaders, big campaign money and a message of accountability tailored to satisfy the skepticism of older voters and "Reagan Democrats" on the city's eastern edge.

"In this day and age, when we have major worldwide problems that seem intractable, this is bucking a trend in the country," said Jonah Edelman, executive director of the Stand for Children advocacy group. "It shows if you make a solid case about using taxpayer money for children, the public will go along."

San Francisco and Seattle are among a handful of U.S. cities with similar children's initiatives, although San Francisco's didn't raise taxes, and Seattle's tax increase was smaller than Portland's. Edelman said his group, which rallied hundreds of volunteers to support Portland's *children's levy*, will try to spur interest in Portland-style initiatives in Corvallis, Lane County and around the country.

The levy will raise \$10 million a year to finance child-abuse prevention, after-school and mentoring programs, and prekindergarten education programs such as Head Start. At 40.26 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed valuation, it will cost roughly \$60 a year for the owner of a home assessed at

\$150,000. All three measures total \$232 for the same home.

It's not clear what programs will get the money beginning July 1. A tentative deal between the city and Multnomah County would have a five-member allocation committee -- including a city politician, a county politician and three residents -- make those calls, subject to approval of Multnomah County's Board of Commissioners and Portland's City Council.

With funding decisions not yet made, backers can't say how many children the initiative will serve. But \$2 million a year to Early Head Start programs for children as old as 3 would halve the program's 600-child waiting list in Multnomah County. About \$5 million a year would provide after-school programs, according to levy supporters.

No organized opposition

The levy had no organized opposition, but before the vote the county's Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission criticized the measure as vague. It caps administrative expenses at 5 percent -- an accountability measure that supporters said was crucial to persuading voters. But it's not clear what expenses that set-aside will cover or how the initiative will fulfill its promise to pay for only "proven programs."

The criticism, combined with the bleak economy and other measures crowding the ballot, made the children's measure a tough sell, said Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who spearheaded the levy. San Francisco's levy squeaked by when it first came on the ballot in 1991, he noted, but was renewed overwhelmingly in 2000, when supporters could show results.

"I held out a grain of hope that it would be a slam dunk, but from the start we knew it was going to be close," Saltzman said. "That's why we were running hard all the way through the last day."

The campaign relied heavily on volunteers for phone banks and door-to-door campaigning, bringing in Edelman's mother, national children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman, to rally the troops. It raised nearly half a million dollars, enough to get on television and blanket bus benches with ads.

The campaign also snared hundreds of endorsements, ranging from downtown business groups to the Urban League of Portland. One weekend in October, the levy was the featured topic at 60 Portland faith congregations.

Targeted message

Lisa Grove, a pollster for the campaign, said the levy also benefited from a carefully targeted message. Early on polls showed weak support in east Multnomah County -- a result that Saltzman says prompted him to push for a city levy rather than a county measure.

Portland's voter registration is 51 percent Democratic versus 40 percent in unincorporated Multnomah County, according to election records. Statewide,

Multnomah County's 49 percent Democratic registration is by far the highest.

Polling also showed "a huge age gap," with voters older than 50 much less likely to support the measure, Grove said. That fact prompted the campaign to bypass the May election and shoot for November, with a younger voter pool.

The campaign targeted parents and voters younger than 50, Grove said. It also tried to narrow the gap with older adults and in the eastern part of the city by emphasizing the commitment to proven programs, the cap on administrative spending and the notion that spending on vulnerable children now would save money in the long run.

"With older voters, the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure is something they get," Grove said. "East of 48th Avenue, the voters are classic Reagan Democrats, and pocketbook issues kind of reign supreme. They want proof that something is going to work."

Precinct results aren't yet available for this election. Results from the May election show the highest support for money measures came from the city's inner eastside, mostly from relatively wealthy neighborhoods. The biggest no votes came on the city's eastern edge, in neighborhoods with lower household incomes.

With a crowded ballot, *children's levy* supporters said they knew they could well be the odd levy out. In 1998, Portland voters approved a fire bond but shot down a parks building bond.

"It was a tough sell just because it's a brand-new program," Grove said. "When you're talking about public services, it's a very status-quo electorate."

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