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How did St. Tammany's library, long a source of controversy, win over voters?

BY WILLIE SWETT | Staff writer

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People line up to enter a St. Tammany Parish Library Board of Control meeting in March 2023.

STAFF FILE PHOTO BY SCOTT THRELKELD

If endorsements were any predictor, the two tax propositions on the March 29 ballot in St. Tammany Parish would have had a radically different outcome.

One tax proposition, which redirected sales tax revenue towards St. Tammany's criminal justice system, received broad support from elected officials and the parish's and state's political class, with even Gov. Jeff Landry chiming in via text to encourage voters to approve it.

The other tax proposition — a property tax that provides 96% of the revenue for the parish's 75-year-old library system — received relatively little formal backing from some of the parish organizations that had endorsed the sales tax rededication.

The organizations' reticence to back the property tax may have been in part due to the controversy the library system has faced since 2022 over minors' access to items with sexual and LGBTQ+ themes.

Although the library has since adopted a tiered card system giving parents more control over their kids' access to materials, the view among some in the parish's political class was that the 4.35-mill library tax was in trouble, while the sales tax rededication had a decent chance of passing.

But instead, the opposite turned out to be true.

Fifty-five percent of voters approved the library millage, according to the Secretary of State's website. The 42,262 people who cast votes represented a far higher turnout than predicted. On the other hand, a

slim majority of voters in unincorporated St. Tammany, where the sales tax is levied, voted against the rededication.

Few endorsements

"We didn't have any public support," said Charles Branton, a library board member who hit the campaign trail to rally support for the tax. "Not the Northshore Business Council, not the Chamber of Commerce, not the city council, not CCST. But we have supporters, patrons, and we put out the facts."

Branton, like others involved in the library's campaign, saw the victory as reflective of the library's messaging — a fact-based approach exemplified by a detailed website that library staff filled with statistics about usage and cost effectiveness and an FAQ that addressed the library controversy head-on.

Sam Caruso Jr., whose firm was hired by the library for \$18,000 to help with outreach, said he has worked on many other tax campaigns, but none have been like the library's.

"If you want to get accurate facts and research done really well, you can't do any better than a room full of librarians," Caruso said.

Library Director Kelly LaRocca attributed the millage campaign's success to her staff and their relationships with library patrons. Starting in February, she said, staff placed bookmarks with election information in every book that patrons checked out.

"We made sure that our patrons couldn't miss it," LaRocca said.

James Hartman, a political consultant who has worked on countless St. Tammany campaigns, meanwhile, saw the outcome as connected to partisan politics. He said "the kerfuffle over library matters in recent years quite predictably, to me, mobilized left-leaning voters more than it did right-leaning voters." He said it was unclear what effect the endorsements had on the election outcome.

Caruso said that when he tried to hire a conservative consultant for the campaign to help address public outcry about the books, the consultant replied, "I wouldn't touch that with a 10-foot pole. You're gonna get your brains beat in."

But many conservatives were openly in support of the library tax, including Branton, whose nomination to the St. Tammany Library Board of Control had been backed by the Republican Executive Committee, St. Tammany Parish Council member Jeff Corbin, who has faced political backlash for his comments about the library board, and Parish Council member Pat Burke, who is also a member of RPEC.

Burke said he thought social media had fueled misinformation about minor access to the library's collection and the library's cost, driving some people to oppose the library millage.

"People who don't go to the library think nobody uses it, but not everybody is fortunate enough to have computers" or to be able to buy books, said Parish Council member Jimmy Strickland, the lone Democrat on the council. "A lot of the people that were speaking against the library didn't really use the library."

Some organizations, like the St. Tammany Economic Development Corporation and the Military Road Alliance, endorsed both the library millage and the sales tax rededication. But others chose just to endorse the latter.

Concerned Citizens of St. Tammany (CCST) came to a stalemate on whether to endorse the library tax, its president, Rick Franzo, said.

Kevin Davis, president of the Northshore Business Council, said his organization was specifically asked to endorse the sales tax rededication, but was not asked about the library tax. Most people in the group were in support of the millage, though, he said.

Lacey Osborne, president of the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce, said the consensus in her organization was that it should not take a position on the library tax.

Caruso, meanwhile, had strong words for some of the groups that chose not to back the library millage.

"It was a lack of courage. It was a lack of willingness to stand up to a very loud minority of voices. I was extremely disappointed in all of the groups, including the ones I belong to, who failed to take a stand."