

VIEWPOINT

Hard work alone won't pass Portage health levy

Many factors contributed to rejection of latest bid for funds

By Ruth and Glenn Saltzman

When we agreed to co-chair the Portage County Health Levy Campaign Committee (Issue 20) for this past election, we naively believed that if voters knew about the important services of the county health department, the rather small request for funds (\$12.60 per year per \$100,000 home) and how the staff of the health department had been reduced from nearly 60 to 21 in the 51 years since an increase had been approved that nearly everyone would want to support this levy.

Our hopes were further buoyed by the fact that in all of our presentations, only two persons objected to the levy. Everyone else we met said they supported the levy and could not see why it hadn't passed long ago. When we approached the Portage County Board of Elections on election evening, we did so with confidence that all of the committee's hard work would pay off with a victory for the residents of Portage County.

We were saddened by the crushing 61 to 39 percent defeat, only a small improvement over the May election when no campaigning was done. We didn't get the results we wanted, but we learned a lot in the process.

What did we learn over the course of this campaign? We learned that:

1. Hard work on a project like this is not enough. Our committee could not have worked harder. Our committee logged several thousand hours telling the Portage County Health Department story.

2. More money would not have significantly helped us change the systemic problem of local organization and funding issues.

3. A voter's knowledge of the facts regarding an issue is not as important as any particular value they might hold (e.g., "No more taxes!" ... or ... "They are doing a good job, why give them more?")

4. Approving a countywide issue without the assistance of Kent and Ravenna voters is very difficult. Three health districts in one county divide and confuse the voters. Many of our Kent and Ravenna friends thought they had always voted for the health department levies, and were surprised they were not included in the populations deciding this issue. They also did not realize that some services provided by these departments are contracted from the Portage County Health Department.

Of the 25 Portage County villages and townships, only four (Franklin Township, Hiram Village, Mantua Village and Sugar Bush Knolls) voted favorably for the health levy. Of the 118,735 population in the county (excluding Kent and Ravenna), 79,714 (67 percent) are registered to vote and of the registered voters 43,588 (54 percent) actually voted. Of those who voted only 39 percent voted for the health levy. These numbers are foreboding and do not hold much promise for future levy campaigns.

5. The Portage County Health Department is not funded like most other health departments in Ohio. Most Ohio health departments receive all or a major portion of their funding from villages and townships. Of the 13 Northeastern Ohio health districts, eight are funded 100 percent by their townships and villages, four are funded by a combination of village/township support and tax levies, and Portage County is the lone county to be funded by only a tax levy. Taxpayers fund only 17 percent of the Portage Health Department budget, with the remainder coming from grants, and fees from licenses and inspections. The only money available for emergency planning and preparation is from

unstable and unpredictable grant funds!

6. It is interesting how various groups decide to support issues or candidates in an election. While some Ohio churches were vocal about the gambling issue, some health groups and hospitals supported the smoke free issue, and some unions took positions on the mini-

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um wage issue, only the League of Women Voters, the Portage County Board of Education, the Record Publishing Company and Howie Chizek encouraged support of this health levy. That was surprising to us because this levy affects the health of every resident of, and visitor to, Portage County. Although it may be unpopular to get behind a tax increase, this was a matter of our health.

One person told us, after the election, that he had not voted for Issue 20 because they were doing a great job, and if they could do that with very little funding, then why give them more? He said, "...schools shut down busing and sports if levies are not passed and states/counties/townships reduce services when funds are not available." I asked him if the Health Department should stop giving immunizations and making sure our food and water sources were safe. He said, "No, you can't do that."

And, of course, I agreed with him. But the Portage County Health Department needs more funding not only to carry out the mandated services we need, but to be prepared for pending disasters that may face us, such as a pandemic flu outbreak, which would be disastrous if we are not prepared.

We met many wonderful folks during the campaign, many who volunteered to be on our committee or donate funds to support this effort. We learned a lot and do not regret a minute we spent working on this important issue. The committee does not feel it lost, we feel happy that more folks know about the services of the Portage County Health Department and will get their children immunized sooner, avoiding many medical problems. On the other hand, we feel sad that so many wonderful Portage County residents won't be as safe as they might have been had Issue 20 been approved.

Our conclusion: In the absence of a county health catastrophe, we doubt that a similar levy can be passed given the current configuration and funding of this county health district. Some might say that the voters of Portage County deserve what they get. We don't agree! We believe that organizational and funding steps should be taken to insure that Portage County residents remain safe and healthy.

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