

Target Fixation: How the New Trier Referendum Crashed

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Piloting an armed helicopter in Vietnam, a college friend of mine died due to target fixation. Military pilots know the phenomenon well: Concentrating on delivering ordnance precisely on target, the psyche becomes so focused that other stimuli go unheeded. The aircraft is flown directly into the target.

Something similar may have contributed to the dramatic defeat of the New Trier facilities referendum, which pitted neighbor against neighbor, filled yards with “yes” and “no” signs, and in the end cost taxpayers \$1.7 million.

A year ago, the New Trier project was approaching near-final form. Together with the superintendent, the seven-member Board of Education had agreed on an ambitious plan for the Winnetka campus. Labeled “renovation,” the project would include demolition, remodeling, and substantial new construction. Architectural drawings were virtually complete.

The last critical hurdle: Convince a majority of District voters to approve \$174 million worth of tax-supported bonds. How difficult that would be was an unknown. Or was it?

A recent Freedom of Information Act request to the District yielded a previously unreleased report on a survey that gauged the strength of the headwinds. It is pivotal information for anyone studying how and why the referendum failed.

In April 2009, the Lisle, Illinois-based political polling firm, Fako & Associates, made a proposal to the District. Fako would conduct a “benchmark poll” which they defined as “a comprehensive quantitative survey that is the basis for your strategic plan.” They would interview 400 District voters by phone.

Product marketers and political candidates alike employ such surveys because large sample sizes, random selection of respondents, and standardized questioning help make results projectable. Unlike focus groups with their free-flowing discussions, the Fako survey would quantify sentiment on the New Trier project. How voters evaluated priorities for the school, what messages might persuade them to favor the facilities plan, their response to the project’s cost, and the arguments for and against the plan would all be addressed. For \$16,500, the District would get a very reliable measure of community sentiment.

Using her discretionary consulting budget, the superintendent authorized the research. The Fako people conducted fieldwork in mid-July, issuing their full report on July 27th.

The 29-page report delivered some strong positive findings. For example, both “top concerns” identified for the school registered a mere 11%. And significant majorities (from 60-83%) evaluated the District’s job performance very highly; believed the

school's teachers were excellent; believed a high-quality state-of-the-art school was important; and felt they received good value for their education-related tax dollars. But when it came to the facilities plan, voters were far less enamored.

In the document's "strategic assessment and recommendations," cautionary findings came one after another. Many voters saw no need: "Slightly more than half feel facilities improvements are not needed." Strong opposition: "... the intensity of the opposition, however, is significantly stronger than that of supporters." Opposition that only increased: "When residents discover the cost of the proposed facilities plan, we see a slight drop in support and a staggering increase in opposition." Finally, near the end of the report: "... the District faces a significant challenge to convince the residents that this plan is necessary, good and a prudent investment." All this on top of arguably the study's key measure: Once aware of the facilities project, its cost, and the arguments for and against, 58% of voters opposed it.

Seeing all this, most people would have bet against the referendum. But the report was never made public.

The superintendent sent it to two Board members on a "community engagement committee." On October 28th, she conveyed a memo titled "Community Engagement Committee Research" to the Board, but without Fako's full report. Attached were what she called "the survey and results," but in the form of a new Fako "summary of key findings" containing none of their earlier negative findings, and nine pages of unanalyzed "topline" results with the "58% opposed" appearing only in a table. Her one note of caution: "The respondents were slightly more favorable than unfavorable of a facilities project, but opposition is much stronger once the cost estimates were factored into the question."

The rest is history. On November 19th, the Board of Education voted unanimously to place the \$174-million facilities plan on the ballot. No one abstained. Then on February 2nd it was voted down by 63% of the electorate, within the 5-point margin-of-error the Fako people statistically established for their findings.

The most logical explanation—perhaps the only explanation—for how such obvious cautionary signals in the original Fako report were ignored is that District leadership succumbed to a referendum case of target fixation. The facilities plan was the product of three years of very hard work, of the passion of so many supporters, of well-meaning leaders and their best intentions for the high school. The pressure to keep pushing this plan must have been remarkably strong and self-reinforcing. In the end, it was also powerful enough to block out the flashing warning indicators, and fly the plan right into the ground.

Mr. Fox is a 25-year Winnetka resident. He spent a 30-year career at the Foote, Cone & Belding advertising agency where he was party to hundreds of market research efforts. He was also active in the "LoveNewTrierVoteNo" group that opposed the facilities referendum.