Columbus Board's Campaign Wins Respect of City Council, But Not Enough Votes to Elect REALTOR® Champion

In politics, as in love, 'win some, lose some' is the way of the world.

And while it's not in every political situation that lemonade can be made from those lemons that are invariably dealt from time to time -- it happened recently in Columbus, Ohio.

"We may have lost the race," says Government Affairs Director Gavin Blair of the Columbus Board of REALTORS®, "but we are in a much stronger position now than before we ran it." Here's what happened:

Members of the Columbus City Council hold four-year terms. As it happens, all seven members of the Council were Democrats. "Definitely not a problem in-and-of-itself," points out Blair, "but it gave the Council a pretty narrow view on certain issues that are important to REALTORS® and other businesses that help drive the economy. And lots of Council business happened behind closed doors, which shut us out completely."

The November 2011 election presented an opportunity to try to add a REALTOR® -friendly member to the Council, so that at least one member would be in a position to hold the others accountable. One such candidate had run in the previous election, and had come close – and was game to try again. So, when NAR introduced its pilot program supporting local opportunity races last year, Blair contacted Gerry Allen, NAR's Managing Director of Campaign Services, and said "we've got an interesting City Council race here…" The initial polling looked promising, and NAR contributed to the tune of $65K to back the challenger's second election effort.

The City Council election is a non-partisan 'field race,' meaning that candidates run city-wide, not by district, and those winning the top number of votes fill the available seats. Blair explains that their strategy was to determine which incumbent Council member was likely to get the lowest number of votes, and 'pick him off,' in favor of the REALTOR® challenger.

In fact, certainly thanks in part to NAR's support, which funded polling, three targeted mailers, robo-calls, and online advertising, the challenger did win the election-day votes. It was an unforeseen wave of absentee ballots that carried the incumbent back to office, however, brought on by a massive union get-out-to-vote effort in response to a referendum on collective bargaining that was also on the ballot; the unions had spent over $100M across the state of Ohio, substantially increasing their voter turn-out.

When the absentee ballots were all accounted for, the make-up of the City Council remained exactly the same. But the Council's relationship with the Columbus Board of REALTORS® has not. "Although, with 6,000 members, we're the biggest association here by far -- with the largest PAC -- it was not until this election that we were seen as big players," explains Blair. "Now we have a seat at the table in municipal governance."

For example, in the recent past, controversial issues like a Vacant Housing Registry and storm water fees were handled in closed executive session. "Now, if there's something that the Council knows will matter to us, they will come to us for discussion. It's become much more constructive, and far less adversarial."

CBR's overwhelmingly positive campaign strategy helped to keep its power from seeming too threatening to the Council, which made this happy transformation possible. The three direct mail pieces were entirely positive. As an 'olive branch' during the campaign, CBR had produced a direct mail piece in support of the Council President, and NAR funded online advertising for him. In the interests of mending fences, CBR ran two ads in the *The Columbus Dispatch* thanking the Council in the months following the election.

The next City Council elections will take place in 2013, and the REALTORS® will be ready. In the meantime, they're enjoying their hard-earned lemonade.