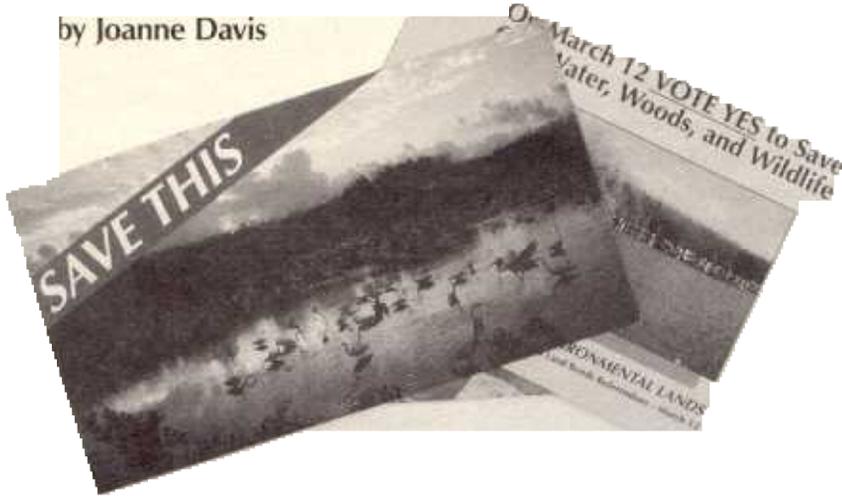


How to Win AN ENVIRONMENTAL REFERENDUM

by Joanne Davis



We won! After years of research, field work, and political lobbying, Palm Beach County secured \$100 million with which to buy the best of what is left of its environmental lands. The important thing is this: The FNPS Palm Beach County Chapter had a few dedicated individuals who followed a specific formula to achieve success in the land referendum. Many of those individuals are hyperactive FNPS members, and a host of others added strength and effectiveness, with expert guidance from The Nature Conservancy.

We had selected the land to be purchased before we asked the voters to spend their money. Based on a survey that was commissioned by the county several years ago, 14 sites were targeted by a citizens advisory committee as the best examples of native ecosystems remaining in Palm Beach County. We did not rank them, which gives us the capability of going for them all at once and negotiating better deals by playing landowners against each other regarding price. We are left unbound by a ranking system that might choke possible negotiations and timing. Also, voters have more hope that sites near them may be purchased before we run out of money.

We launched our campaign three months before the vote in a press conference at a local nature center. It was then we discovered the importance of cultivating media interests. We signed the paperwork creating our Political Action Committee (PAC), and defined the roles each of us would play. We named one spokesperson, one publications coordinator, a two-person speakers bureau (which grew as the vote came near), a treasurer, and a fundraising coordinator. There was one paid position:

the phone bank coordinator for the volunteer phone bank. Our campaign budget was set at \$100,000, primarily to pay for the phone bank position and for two color brochures to be mailed to targeted voters.

It was a grassroots campaign, and we kept politics out of it as much as possible, focusing on the urgency of buying the land before it is bulldozed. That became the message to the media: "Save it before it is gone!"

To tease the media into participating, we wrote letters to the editor, and sent media alerts for events that we invented and staged. We also faxed press releases to them, letting them know what was next. Often, reporters simply rewrote our submissions, and they were published the next day; hence, the importance of having someone with good writing skills on the team. Essentially we created news, and the media gobbled it up. We also arranged editorial board meetings with the three major newspapers in the area to invite them to endorse our project, although we never came right out and said it. We provided them with facts about the sites, information about who we were, and some articles from other counties' newspapers addressing similar referendums.

About three weeks before the vote, we began using the newspapers' natural competitive tendencies for our needs. We showed them photo essays that had been presented by the *Tampa Tribune*. As the editors became interested, we told the other papers that one was thinking about a pictorial presentation about our referendum—and that was all it took. All three papers wanted early morning field trips to photograph the sites in question. The result was the best three

sets of photo essays to date on a project like this! We had front-page color features, and a two-page color spread. We were a hot local news story, breaking within two weeks of the vote with big color pictures of Scrub Jays, wet prairies, and environmentalists taking school children for nature walks.

All the while, the speakers bureau was booking talks, slide presentations, and debates for homeowners and condo groups, political clubs, schools, and anyone else who wanted information. The paid phone bank called people identified as "frequent voters", while the volunteer phone bank, staffed by dedicated conservationists, called other conservationists from lists obtained early in the campaign. We did continual fundraising to support the work, and published countless fact sheets distributed throughout the county by volunteers.

One of our color brochures hit one week before the vote, a beautiful piece with pictures of birds and baby animals, and scenic wilderness photos. The second color brochure had a photo of wilderness on the front with a headline that read, "Save this." On the inside was a photo of a bulldozer destroying pine flatwoods, with a caption that read, "or lose it forever!" It was received by the public on the Friday and Monday before the vote.

We worked ourselves into a frenzy. We had serious opposition from the Homebuilders and Contractors Association and an anti-tax group called Committee for Good Government. We were concerned about effects of the Persian Gulf crisis, the economic depression, and a local anti-tax mood. In spite of all that, the referendum passed by a two-to-one margin. Not only did the environmental movement overwhelm the county, but we sent a strong message all over the state: citizens are no longer willing to put up with business as usual in the destruction of our last bits of native Florida.

We had a fine team, backed up by expert guidance. Palm Beach County will never forget the valiant efforts of The Nature Conservancy and the Palm Beach County Chapter of FNPS. We can shout out loud, "We won!"

Joanne Davis is president of the Palm Beach Chapter.