



Building Unbeatable Coalitions Behind Outdoor Recreation Initiatives Transcript

March 6, 2024

Chris Perkins 00:00

Thank you for joining me just recording in progress. I will screen share.

Chris Perkins 00:33

folks thanks for joining we'll start in just a minute pulling out my screen started for me

Chris Perkins 00:52

nice well are you seeing my slides on your end?

Will Abberger 00:55

am. Chris. Thank you. Who

Chris Perkins 01:09

Okay, well welcome folks. This is such an awesome session. My name is Chris Perkins. I'm the vice president of programs at outdoor recreation Roundtable. I'm really pleased to present this next session of the comprehensive states education series today. For those of you who haven't joined before, we host these sessions once every couple months for state level leaders in the outdoor recreation economy, including public sector employees like State Directors of outdoor recreation, nonprofit groups, or business interest groups like outdoor business alliances, trade associations, nonprofits at the ground level, et cetera. And we we focus on topics that are interesting and relevant to people who are working to catalyze outdoor recreation economy development at the state and local level.

Traditionally each of these sessions is hosted by a director from a confluence of states, who then introduces folks from their state to talk about examples related to the issue at hand. This session is a little different with the leadership of Tom Berger, who's the State and Local Government Relations Manager at REI. We've invited two outstanding guests who work in the conservation finance space, both at the national level at the Trust for Public Land and the local level or state level at environment Texas. Many of you probably saw this headline when it crossed your internet virtual desk in 2023. And I was one of those people and I was blown away. I think when you see Texas, billion dollars in funding and state parks in the same sentence, you want to know more and so it's been in my head to have a session like this for some time and with Tom's leadership, we were able to put together why now and I'm just going to stop sharing for a moment to go to my notes.

I think first of all, the momentum is really behind the sales of outdoor recreation. Right now. We're seeing recognized recognition across the board about the value of outdoor recreation both

in places like national parks, national forests, but of course close to home. Five Minutes from one's front door for the value and public health, community connection economic benefits that it provides. So it's really on us to take advantage of that momentum. Second is that we're in an election year and state legislatures are in session. There are hundreds of ballot measures legislative opportunities related to Outdoor Recreation and Conservation under consideration right now. And there are countless advocates on either side of proposals working really hard to make their case.

Although most in this group are not in the business of advocacy. I'd argue that we're all collectively in the business of winning hearts and minds around outdoor recreation, whether that be in a campaign setting or behind closed doors with agency colleagues or local stakeholders or legislative staffers. Every cause there is has a degree of polling and data sophistication and political strategy and I think it serves us all well to consider how our own strategy as an outdoor recreation economy movement might evolve. I think it's safe to say that campaigns are not one with good ideas alone, though I wish they were.

Campaigns require a mix of timely ideas, coalition building and resonance with all kinds of individuals, whether they be allies or detractors to succeed. So my suggestion to you is to envision how the lessons from our two speakers would apply to promoting the pillars of the confluence of states that we all advance through our work in one way or another and those pillars are conservation and stewardship, education and workforce training, economic development and public health and wellness. I hope that our speakers are able to lend great advice on transference between their successful campaigns and the priorities that you seek to support through your work.

So without further ado, here's who's joining us today. First is Will Abberger. Will is the director of the Trust for Public Lands National Conservation finance program. He helped state and local governments and citizen groups throughout the United States. gauge public support for conservation and craft ballot and legislative measures that generate new sources of funding for parks and land conservation in 2013 to 2014 will lead the campaign to qualify for the ballot via the initiative petition process and win voter approval for the Florida Water land conservation amendment. The largest state conservation land ballot measure in history has been directly involved in more than 100 successful local state land conservation ballot measures and numerous legislative campaigns.

Luke Metzker is the executive director of environment Texas, Luke is a leading voice in the state for clean air, clean water, clean energy and open space. Luke has led successful campaigns to win permanent protection for the Christmas mountains of Big Bend to compel Exxon shell and Chevron Phillips to cut air pollution at three Texas refineries and chemical plants and to boost funding for water conservation, renewable energy and state parks. The San Antonio current called Luke long one of the most energetic and dedicated defenders of environmental issues in the state. He's been named one of the top lobbyists for causes by Capitol inside and received the President's Award from the Texas Recreation and Parks society for his work to protect Texas Parks. We'll start with Will. He'll go for about 15 minutes then Luke. Then we'll open to q&a If you have questions. Throughout please put it in the chat and I'll use my discretion if it

seems like a really timely question to ask live on insert myself into the conversation. But well and Luke, thanks so much for being here. We'll I'll pass it over to you and get your slides going.

Will Abberger 07:27

Thanks so much, Chris. And thanks to the outdoor recreation roundtable and Confluence states for inviting me to present today. And please Would love to generate some discussion and questions here. What Chris asked me to address is is messaging and how we target messages to specific audiences and then deliver those messages and I'm going to do a little bit of a deep dive into one of our ballot measure campaigns. But I want to start out particularly on the heels of Super Tuesday if you go the next slide Luke, by letting you know that based on our work at the Trump Republican line on state and local ballot measures, land conservation is not a partisan issue for American voters.

This map, I'm sure you'll all recognize shows the results of the presidential election from 2020 with the red states between those states that voted for former President Trump and the blue states being those states that voted for President Biden and then laid over that the green dots you see there are were land conservation ballot measures took place on that same ballot and you see actually many, quite a few of them in the blue states, but many in the red states as well.

And you'll go to the next slide, please, Luke when we drill down a little bit, sorry, Chris, when we drill down a little bit on those ballot measures, and we look at the counties that had a measure on the ballot in that same November 320 20 presidential election and how those measures pass. You see that even though the passage rate in the Biden counties was 100%, the passage rate in the Trump counties was was 83%. Very, very strong. So we believe very strongly that that land conservation is not a partisan issues for voters in the United States. Go the next slide, please.

The Trust for Public Land and our conservation finance program has been involved in more than 650 successful state and local ballot measures questions placed before voters asking them to dedicate funding for parks or conservation. This is since about 1996 When we started our program, and we've had the great good fortune to win 83% of the measures that we support and that's helped create about \$94 billion in new funding for parks and conservation at the state and local level.

Next slide, please, Chris. And really, this is sort of the methodology that we've developed over the years for how we get to that 83% passage rate and again, we're gonna go into a little case study here that'll go a little bit deeper into into messaging and, and, and how we determine what the most important messages are, but it really starts with feasibility research. Understanding what the finance mechanisms that are available in the jurisdiction are, how much revenue they would generate, and very importantly, what the impact on taxpayers would be. The next step.

If you'll click one more, please, Chris is is polling we do 10 to 15 polls in different jurisdictions at the state and local level across the country every year, the trust Republican and our conservation finance program, testing specific ballot measures and you're going to see an example of that. But I would suggest to you that solid public opinion research, whether it's a poll or whether it's a focus group or whether it's some other tool is still a really good way to understand voter attitudes towards conservation and outdoor recreation and figure out how we

best want to position ourselves and our case position ourselves to generate new funding. Based on what we learned in the feasibility research in the poll, we're then able to bring forward a pretty well informed recommendation about what the ballot measure should look like. What's the right finance mechanism? When should it be on the ballot? How much should it be for? From a messaging standpoint, what kind of purposes and uses for the font should we emphasize in order to win and what kind of accountability provision should it include? We always call the actual ballot language out what you read when you get ready to cast your ballot. As as as a fourth step. We've known anecdotally for years this is critically important, but we've done post election research and a couple of states now and found that that voters do read the ballot language that it does make a difference in how they vote, particularly those people who haven't made up their mind before they get ready to cast their ballot. Then the last part is a campaign this is what most people think about this is getting the voters to say yes part but really, it's research and I would suggest to you in any endeavor, sound research, particularly some public opinion research is really going to help guide your messaging, but really, you know, the hallmark of the conservation finance program at the Trust for Public Land is is really designing a ballot measure that's going to have the very best chance for success so that once it does make it to the ballot, we knew we were going to have a good chance of winning.

So the case study I want to dive into here with you is down on what we call the Treasure Coast in Florida that southeastern coast. Indian River County. Vero Beach is a place some of you might recommend where you might have gone for spring break. But north of Miami, south of the Titusville towards Space Coast area, beautiful county very rapidly growing. We had the great good fortune to work with them in 2004 on a \$50 million bond referendum to fund land county level land conservation in Indian River County that was approved at 67%. And advocates in Indian River County came back to us in about 2019 2020 and said hey, we spent our 50 Man we'd like to take a new measure back to the voters and see see if we could renew funding for our conservation program. This was really the guts of our our the feasibility report we did for Indian River County at that time. In this case we honed in on bonds borrowing based on property tax revenues for funding for land conservation. And what this chart is doing is looking at a number of different bond issuance sizes, how much the county would have to pay and principal and interest so this is pretty much like a mortgage on a home except we're borrowing money for land conservation. What that would require in terms of a property tax increase, and then very importantly, what the impact on taxpayers would be.

And so, bonding is a really popular financing mechanism particularly in a fast growing state like Florida because the fundings available upfront to acquire the land while it's cheaper, but the payments are spread out over time. And so everyone who's benefiting is going to be participating and helping to support the bond issuance financially. So we really honed in in any River County on on that \$50 million amount and a tax impact of \$46 a year for the average homeowner in Indian River County. And that's what we pulled if you go to the next slide, please, Chris. Well, real quick,

Chris Perkins 14:52

who does feasibility research who do you hire to do that or like, organization does that briefly.

Will Abberger 14:57

So we do that in house. We have a research team at the Trust for Public Land that conducts our feasibility research for us and did the Indian River County study as well. So there are a lot of numbers on this chart. But this is our poll. We tested the actual ballot language much as it would appear on the ballot. If this would have made it to the ballot in any River County. This was in October of 2021. Looking toward putting the measure on the ballot in the November midterm in 2022. And the blue bars are people who say they'd vote yes in support of the \$50 million bond and the red bars are those who say they would vote no against a \$50 million bond. So we're about 54% Just concentrate on that, that all voters they're saying they would vote yes but 43% say and they would definitely vote yes. 14 said percent saying they would vote no and 9% saying that. They would definitely vote no, not a bad place. To start out. To go the next slide please. Chris.

Chris Perkins 16:13

Is you seen it? No. On mine, it says ballot measure cost the average homeowner \$46 per year.

Will Abberger 16:21

Oh yeah, sorry. Yeah, there it is. So yeah. So right after that question about just reading them about language we give them the cost impact if you knew this would cost you the average homeowner in in your county and additional \$46 a year. How would you vote and right away you see support goes up pretty significantly. We were at 54% saying they would vote yes before and now we're at 63% say they would vote yes. So important piece of information for us going forward but again, shows that understanding the constant pact is really really important. Next slide please, Chris. So again, I'm not going to get into a lot of these numbers. But Indian River County is a majority Republican jurisdiction. It did it was plus 15. For Trump in 2020. And so we really wanted to understand Republican voters and particularly, who are those Republican voters among the people who will be voting in that November 2022? midterm election, who we could possibly persuade, and this all comes from the demographics in the poll. But if you'd look at that list over there on the on the right hand side of the slide, we've identified strong and soft supporters and what those Republicans look like. And we've also identified a persuadable cohort of Republicans and what they look like from a demographic standpoint and I will tell you, this is pretty typical for our ballot measure campaigns that we see women, Republicans, as typically an important swing audience for us, maybe not supporting the ballot measure initially just based on hearing the ballot language, but once we can provide them with a little bit more information they understand the importance of land conservation and come our way.

So these are some of the messages we tested in that poll. And I've highlighted the ones there that are strongest among those voters. We identified as persuadable voters in the poll, who may have been soft supporters at the beginning have shifted around moving from yes to know over the course of the poll. The top message for us was around the Indian River Lagoon, which is estuary there and Indian River County had been experiencing some major water quality problems. die offs of fish and manatees as well. And so that was a really strong message with 87% of the voters saying that's a convincing message and 62% saying 67% saying it's a very convincing message. And so normally the threshold for a convincing message in any political campaign is about 40 percents and knowing that we're at 67% saying that's a very convincing messages is very, very strong. We had a message about accountability that you see there in the secondary sorry about growth that you see there in the second one down with land prices rising dramatically. We must

act now. And then a drinking water message that third one down. And then last message around, preserving the quality of life in Indian River County.

Now for the outdoor recreation roundtable, you don't see any recreation messages here. And that's because we typically find that these kinds of messages that take our issue to a higher level, like some of the water quality issues like passing on a legacy to future generations, like protecting our quality of life are really the ones that move voters much more persuasively than messages around active recreation. So once we get to the end of the poll, and we've delivered all those messages to voters, we tested some messages against the measure as well and I'm not going to show you you can see we get up to about 68% saying they would vote yes with 12% saying they would vote no and about 90% still undecided. So not a big increase. But clearly starting at 54. Once we are able to deliver these messages to voters, we see a real chance to bring more of them our way and win our measure.

And so, to make a very long story short, if you'll go to the next slide, please, Chris. This these were some of the recommendations that the pollster gave from that poll. As you see those the messages that we already talked a lot about the Indian River Lagoon about preserving our last remaining wildlife habitat and protecting drinking water and preserving quality of life. We're really important. And we see a real increase in support among voters, particularly Republicans here 58% of them are voting yes on our final and more ballot test once they receive that information. So our job in this campaign, like any campaign is to deliver those messages, messages to voters. We do that in a variety of ways and we use a lot of digital but we also use direct mail.

If you'll go to the next slide, Chris, targeting those Republican voters and Republican winning voters. This is what I would call a pretty hard hitting piece of direct mail with this image of the fish die off and the name again, but again, taking it right back to those those messages that we learned from our public opinion research were more strongest among those persuadable voters. And the result, I'm pleased to say was 78% Yes and 22% No on Election Day creating about \$50 million in new funding for conservation in Indian River County.

And I'll leave you there with a beautiful sunset over the Indian River Lagoon. I wanted also to leave you with a recommendation there's a memo that's put out by a couple of pollsters that we work with and The Nature Conservancy called the language of conservation. I've made that available to Chris and I'm certainly happy to send it to any of you but it's really recommendations from the poll like the one you saw on Indian River County. And research that we've done around these ballot measures. Going back really to 2004 as well. Some national polling that we've done in the Nature Conservancy is done of American voters and it really provides you with the with the easy to fall list of rules. These are the things you should say these are the things you shouldn't say. And I'd really be happy to make that available to all of you and Chris can make it available to you as well. So as

Chris Perkins 23:12

we addition to Luke's presentation, I'll make sure to put that in the chat as well. Well, did you have anything else that you wanted to add before? Luke? And no, that's

Will Abberger 23:23

it. I think I would just sum up by saying you know, this is a very micro level example for folks working at the state level and recreation, but I think the lessons apply sound research, followed by a strategic campaign. is the key to winning.

Chris Perkins 23:42

Excellent, thank you so much. We'll and I'm gonna pass it over to you, Luke. And give me just a moment to pull up your slides, if you want to

Luke Metzger 23:52

share some opening remarks. Sure. Great. Thanks, Chris. And hello, everyone. So I'm Luke Metzker. Again, with environment Texas and I want to go into kind of a deep dive of how we got the Texas Legislature and then ultimately Texas voters to approve the \$1 billion investment in state parks. And we you know, we there's a picture of my family camping. We are big parks enthusiast ourselves. We're working to visit every one of the 89 Texas State Parks, and I've just made my job a lot harder now as more parks will be added but that's a challenge I'm happy to take on and I think you know Chris, you put it well the beginning around Cinder the the key elements that made this win possible. And you know, one is having a good idea is is is really important and having you know a bold vision was a key part of it. That coalition though was was critical and having the right people delivering the message. We wouldn't have got one without that. And then I think timing and you know, fair bit of luck also played a role.

So next slide. So just a little bit about environment, Texas. We're part of that national network called environment America. We're active in about 30 states around the country and we work for clean air and water parks and wildlife, clean energy, livable climate. And, you know, through a combination of research, grassroots organizing and advocacy, work to secure real results, you know, for our environment.

Next slide. So, the our campaign to protect our state parks and expand it really kind of started around the same time that environment Texas launched in 2006 And next slide. You know, for a long time, the Texas state parks were suffering from lack of funding and you know, for many years, particularly in down economic and lean budget years. There were threats of closing you know, as many as 20 state parks. And you know, there is a huge backlog of maintenance needs at our parks and insufficient staffing and lots of problems. And so for many years, advocates work to guarantee just sufficient funding to keep the base or the existing parks system afloat, and work to guarantee that sales taxes on sporting goods which had been promised to go to our state parks would actually go to our state parks for many years the legislature rated that fund and only about 40% of the promise dollars actually went to our state parks. And so in 2019

Next slide. We, along with other advocates were able to pass Proposition five, which guaranteed that those sales tax on sporting goods would go to fund parks operations. So now that the existing parks were in much better shape, we felt it was appropriate time to start thinking about expanding the park system and envisioning what not just the bare minimum that the state parks needed, but you know, what was really needed? And we had to do a lot of research, you know, going back decades to make the case that Texas needed more state parks.

Next slide. So going back under Governor, then Governor George Bush the tech taking care of Texas report first just pointed out that you know, as Texas is growing rapidly, that we needed to continue to invest in public lands. That report was followed up by another one next slide that came out in 2001, written by Texas Tech University and they put actually a figure on it. So they estimated that in order to keep up with our population growth and and maintain adequate parks and recreation opportunities for Texans, the state would need to add more than 1.4 million acres of land by 2030. And so this is a report I read you know, pretty much when I started working on environmental issues in Texas and always had that dream that, you know, we would actually kind of work towards that vision. But of course, as I said earlier for the longest time, you know, we were only talking about just taking care of existing parks, you know, it was good considered crazy, you know, to even mention this number. People didn't even conservation advocates shied away from pointing out this figure for fear that it would appear crazy and something that was you know, unrealistic. But I kept it in mind.

And next slide. In it right after we won proposition five, the very next January. So two months later, I convened a group of conservation advocates to say great, we won now let's talk about what's next let's let's make a big pitch for actually achieving that more than million acre goal that the state needed to meet demand and what our first obstacles really came from our own conservation community. As I mentioned, just people thought, you know, talking about a million acres you know, our existing state park system right now is only about 600,000. So we were talking about more than doubling the system. And understandably, you know, given you know, the decades of underfunding from Texas State Parks, you know, advocates were wary of bringing up such an idea and so these are just some quotes from emails I got from advocates after that meeting. You know, saying going back to the legislature quickly will simply make them angry. And, you know, really we should, you know, be careful here. And first just do some research about you know, how the state parks are measuring up with with others, and so, definitely took that feedback. Seriously, and, you know, and recognize, you know, we had a challenge, you know, first working to just get that conservation community willing to, to make that bold ask. Yeah, and then we as well points out, you know, we have very few public lands in Texas, you know, only about 2% are in protected state parks. So, in later that in a year and a half later in the 20 21/3 special session.

So this is I think, September of 2021. The governor called a special session to consider in part what to do with \$16 billion in Coronavirus relief funds. And thankfully, you know, we were very excited to see that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department put in a request they asked for more than \$400,000,000.04 of those funds for which about 124 would go for land acquisition. And so this is the first time that I think ever the parks department had asked for such as so much money for land acquisition, so we rallied in their support to campaign to get the legislature to actually grant that request.

Next slide. So we you know, ran op eds lobbied the legislature and unfortunately, at the end of the day, we got \$0 from from those COVID funds. For our state parks.

Next slide. So in the next year, what we did that is kind of go back to that initial idea, which is you know, we needed to make the case that Texas needed more state parks It was certainly wasn't understood that Texas didn't have enough and so we wrote a report called The most valuable

legacy at which we released at a press conference with pictured here is state representative Armando Wally, who is the chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee overseeing the parks department to really make the case that Texas needed more parks.

Next slide. What we found is that Texas ranks just 35th in the nation for seat Parkland per capita, and that Florida and similar big conservative state southern state had 54% more acres than in Texas, and that that meant that too often people were turned away because we just didn't have enough parks for people. And many people. You know, we pointed out had the experience of having to book a campsite many months ahead of time in order to have chance of of booking a site to particular one of our popular parks.

Next slide. We also found that between 1997 and 2017, Texas had lost 2,000,002 point 2 million acres of land to development. That's an average of about 10 football fields per hour. We got some new data that was actually the most recent five year of data and found that that had actually doubled the pace and so now it's 20 football fields of lands being lost every hour to development. Next slide. This is an example we found you know, a state park right in the middle of Austin, where development was encroaching right up along the border. You can see that green line used to be a trail and they had to shut it down. Because you know, people are hiking right among homes and so they created that new Yellow Line Trail so that people that actually have that kind of a real outdoors experience.

Next slide. And then of course, you know, Texas has dozens of endangered species like the golden cheek warbler and Texas horned lizard that are endangered and are protected by state parks and need more habitat.

Next slide. So we started we released that report and started talking to legislators about the idea of asking of getting a billion dollars for state parks. And again, we face pushback. This is again some quotes from an email from a legislative staffer who again, you know, just kind of poo pooped the idea of saying an unrealistic pie in the sky ask it's not something we can seriously pitch to our bosses wanting to you know, develop something more sustainable, realistic. And so that again, that gave us great pause here. And, you know, at this point of our campaign, you know, we felt like we had a good idea, but we didn't really have much kind of resources. We you know, we had very little funding, we just had a small grant to do that report, no other funding to wage a real campaign. And nor did we really have many conservation advocates gonna join with us, you know, there's kind of a separate effort to kind of fund conservation easements that a lot of conservation groups were rallying around and so we were really kind of on our own here and had to make a decision about whether to you know, pare it down or ask or not, but we had a few good reasons to think that we should carry forward next slide.

The first so we, you know, we went ahead and launched what we call our million acre parks project, you know, working to add a million acres of state parks to the state and started doing outreach, you know, at events all around like this one in Dallas.

Next slide. But we knew that 2023 was the 100 year anniversary of the state park system that there was going to be a lot of attention and excitement and celebration around the state parks heb which is the big grocery store chain here. was doing a bunch of advertising, you know,

celebrating the Centennial Park system. And there had just been a movie called Deep in the heart narrated by Matthew McConaughey. So Parks and Wildlife are we're getting a good amount of tension and so we thought the timing was right, you know, to say, What a perfect time to make an investment. You know, we were celebrating 100 years. Let's start planning for the next 100 years.

Next slide. And importantly, Texas had a gigantic surplus \$32 billion available to it that they had to spend. And at this point in the campaign, you know, nobody was talking about using any of it for state parks. It was you know, property tax cuts, you know, border security, you know, maybe you know, broadband and water, but you know, Parks wasn't on the table, but we thought we could get it to be in the next next slide.

And a group called Texas 2036 had previously done a poll, and they had found that, you know, they had asked in a variety of questions about how should we spend the surplus money, and 73% of Texas said we should use a billion dollars for state parks. So we had, you know, clear polling evidence that this was an idea that that Texans were excited about.

Next slide. And then, early in 2023, we Texas lost a state park Fairfield Lake State Park had been leased by a power company which sold it to a developer and the result dirt long drawn out battle to try and save the state park that got a lot of attention and a lot of energy from the chairman of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. Beaver Applin, who's the owner of the famous buttoned beloved buches convenience store chain here in Texas and he got a lot of feet of political capital into lobbying to save Fairfield State Park and got the speaker a number of legislators really focused on it. And so, we knew that that that again kind of raised the importance of the issue and helps remind people you know, during the centennial year, we're potentially going to take a step backwards and how embarrassing and sad that would be.

Next slide. So we had all that kind of going for us, but it's still I knew, you know, good ideas, not enough. You know, we need the right people to help us make that message. And so, you know, I was thinking about who you know, who is the decision maker here. Was a number people, the governor, the lieutenant governor, the speaker, and you know, this is kind of a model of a Power Map, which many of you are probably familiar with, but trying to figure out like, Who do we know that can get to the decision maker, and I am not close to any of those three, not a wealthy or influential Republican activist, but I figured I could probably find some to team up with us on this next slide. And so, this is kind of a fun Twitter story. I met this guy named Doug Deason on Twitter, and actually we had a fight to begin with about wind power. And he was arguing, you know, wind power was bad for birds. And I was, you know, kind of gently pushing back and saying, Well, actually, you know, climate change is the biggest threat, and we need wind power. And, you know, ultimately we clearly didn't agree at all about about wind power. But we had a civil discussion and he clearly cared a lot about, you know, raptors and birds. And so I was like, Okay, this is a guy who cares about conservation. So I had this in the back of my head, like, oh, yeah, I should think about this guy. And so as we were developing a campaign kind of late or early in 2022, and it was trying to decide who we're going to get on our side.

Next slide. I did some research on Deason. And there had been a profile of him and D magazine, the kind of magazine in Dallas. And he was quoted as saying, I've got every single statewide elected officials cell phone number and I know them personally, and I was like, Okay, this is a

guy that's probably is close on that power mask and actually has the influence that we need. And so I just did a shot in the dark, you know, and he had followed me on Twitter after our little back and forth. So I was able to direct message him on Twitter and here's the you can see on the left, my little pitch I made to him, you know, this this year is the 100th anniversary, we're working to make a big investment. Texas is ranked 35th. You know, and, and then he responded, you know, it was you know, I had no idea if he was going to respond at all, but he did and he's like, you know, love the idea. You know. And so that was the first we set up a phone call and to kind of pitch them on the campaign and over the month, you know, many months work to kind of get him excited and get him to actually take action on it. And so, ultimately, he co signed an op ed with me in the Dallas Morning News and really started to work his networks, you know, texting Lieutenant Governor texting the speaker, urging them to go big, and then importantly, recruiting state senator tan Parker to carry the bill for us.

Next slide. So the Dallas Morning News ended up doing a profile of the two of us and kind of this odd bedfellows kind of campaign. And again, that helps going to draw attention to us and people were really delighted with with that kind of bipartisan coalition working for this next slide. And so here we are 10 Parker's senator in the middle dog on the right. And kind of worked. You know why I recruited Dog Dog recruited tan and then really the ball just kind of got rolling. We played a supportive role, but at that point, you know, Senator Parker and dog really made it happen.

Next slide. We also then work to just you know, draw more attention around recruiting the actor Ethan Hawke, who's from Texas and we've worked with before and other kind of prominent Texans to join our steering committee and get some attention around it.

Next slide. And then ultimately, you know, that we legislature passed. Proposition 14, I'm sorry, passed SJR 74, which turned into proposition 14, which created a constitutionally protected fund that was supported with a billion dollar appropriation, and that was going to the ballot next slide.

So we teamed up with a coalition called Texas Coalition for state parks, which had really helped spearhead the work around prop five, four years before and got the band back together, you know, now you know lots of conservation groups kind of rallying around us, as well as outdoor retailers like REI Tom do a great was really influential in helping get groups on board. The North Face you know, weighed in and other kind of outdoor groups access funds and others really helped both lend their name and in some cases, you know, invested money in the campaign, right will help write op eds and many other things to kind of build support for this.

Next slide. This is the Coalition did some polling again to figure out which messages were most compelling and all of these I think, according to pollster did pretty well. Well, and I both agreed that some of them the language was smushed together so it's hard to really tease out exactly which were the exact right messages but in general, you know, as well said earlier, you know, you know, quality of life, you know, protecting water and land, were all you know, important messages. But also interestingly that, you know, the rapid growth of Texas, you know, the loss of open space to development, and uphold really high as a compelling message. And so that had been something that we had been using all along, but we weren't sure if that would actually resonate.

And we're pleased to see that a dead next slide and so then we ultimately, you know, started campaigning, this is an event we did in Houston with with students. Houston was a key part of the electorate. They had a mayoral election last November and so they were going to represent something like 25% of the entire statewide expected turnout for the proposition so we made a big emphasis on getting local media attention, you know, in the Houston media market, and then we did some advertising, and we were able to recruit Kacey Musgraves, the country singer and native Texan to narrate a video for us, which we can show here, in which we then use snippets for advertising and got a lot of free earned media by having her name on it. So let's

Chris Perkins 44:20

go ahead and watch the video. There Give me just a second to enable sorry, yeah, yeah. Quick.

Chris Perkins 44:32

Here on November 7, we Texans had the opportunity. I was

Luke Metzger 44:41

like the music isn't working. You can imagine to create new state parks, I can't get

Video 44:48

I'm Kacey Musgraves. You probably and I want to tell you about Prop 14, a once in a lifetime opportunity to ensure that our kids, grandkids and future Texans will always have a place to cast the line. I'm sorry, I know. That's okay. Yeah.

Luke Metzger 45:04

Well just imagine sweeping music behind what Casey is saying.

Luke Metzger 45:17

holidays for some reason I'm not here yet.

Chris Perkins 45:20

Sorry, no, my, my screens frozen Hold on one sec. I'm gonna skip ahead and look, do you mind just continuing your remarks by Yeah, well,

Luke Metzger 45:39

that was that was going to be the end of it. But ultimately, we ended up winning 76% of the votes. Every county in the state voted for proposition 14 And so now as of January 1, the the centennial Parks Conservation Fund is officially open. They have a billion dollars, that we expect to earn something like \$50 million in interest on it every year. And so the Parks Department plans to first focus on just spending the interest and which you know, get easily get them a park a year. And the money can be used both to buy the land and then to initially develop the property to open it up to the public. They'll need to separately find funds to staff the parks. But we're confident again with Sporting Goods sales tax funds that they'll be able to do so. But we may need to go back, you know, for additional funding asks in in coming years. And yeah, it's really exciting. You know, I think you know, we this again, you know, we we hope that they won't just use the interest, you know, particularly if there's really special parks, that they'll use, you know,

some of the corpus of the money as well. Certainly Senator Parker and Dyson, who I mentioned before, they're like, Let's spend this billion dollars the next three years and then we'll come back and ask for another billion which is so funny because you know, as the as the progressive, you know, the Conservatives are out progressive. They may, you know, in terms of their boldness, but I'm like, okay, but yeah, that doesn't seem, you know, basically Moodle, perhaps a bit over their skis in terms of, you know, what's possible, but exciting to see that there's still just a big appetite for further investments.

Chris Perkins 47:26

There was a question, well, first of all, let me just say Luke will this has been awesome and so inspiring, and I was personally so invested in that story. You just walked us through Luke and so great to see the payoff. I want to open it to the audience for q&a. And Jessica asks, Can the funding be used for existing parks in need of modernization or infrastructure improvements? Or is it only for new acquisitions,

Luke Metzger 47:49

existing parks that we could buy land and expand existing parks, but not improve existing parks? They can only improve new parks that the language of the statute or the constitutional mandate actually says that the parks department can only access the funds for real property. And but apparently that's been interpreted to include initial improvements on new lands but not existing land. So is

Chris Perkins 48:14

there something to the politics of that, like why new acquisitions are more palatable than modernization or improvements or is that more of a administrative challenge issue?

Luke Metzger 48:24

Well, certainly, his vision was that what's that Biden

Luke Metzger 48:31

Yeah, Senator Parker, you know, he wanted this to be a land buying fund, you know, he was like, that's the the emphasis, we want to conserve land and get as much, you know, bang for our buck as that as possible. And so I think that was his vision. And so improving existing parks didn't quite fit up with, you know, his kind of sweeping vision of what the funds would be used for. So I'm just thrilled that the lawyers were able to get it such that we can use some of it for improvements, at least for existing parks. Nice.

Chris Perkins 49:00

And there was then sorry for the new parks. There was that stated need from the early report about whatever 1.4 million acres of of Parkland needed so it was it was servicing an identified need. So that that also makes sense as well.

Luke Metzger 49:14

Exactly. Exactly.

Chris Perkins 49:17

Yeah, um, scotch like last our parks in Texas available for motorized and non motorized use like

Luke Metzger 49:27

I think it depends on the park, but certainly some of them parks, some parks are accessible with motorized vehicles.

Chris Perkins 49:40

And a question that's relevant to this group from the language for conservation piece and this is just speaking from the data. The report says that advocates should not make access to public lands or natural areas the centerpiece of appeals for conservation. Only a small sliver of the electorate typically dedicated outdoor enthusiast recognizes the need for increased conservation to create connections to protected land. Improving access to parks and natural land is the second least important of the 24 goals we tested which was 48% say it's very important so still pretty decent numbers but comparatively not as valuable. The report also says do couple discussion of outdoor recreation with its economic impact. We consistently see that outdoor recreation tends to fall to the bottom of voters priorities and far below the most resonant items like water or wildlife, but we are seeing more Americans recognizing the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in their states.

Half of voters strongly agree that our state national parks, forests, monuments and wildlife areas are a central part of their state's economies. So my question to you both is as outdoor recreation advocates, what do we do with that? Do we hitch our wagons to conservation branded campaigns? Can we carve out space for ourselves in different ways? What the take home for outdoor recreation advocacy. Do you think?

Will Abberger 51:15

Yeah, so great question, Chris. Language of conservation is really speaking to what Luke and I both been talking about today, which is great and new funding for conservation. So among all the reasons why people are willing to vote yes to tax themselves for conservation, which are the most important and so that's where that kind of line of thinking that you see in the language of conservation memo comes from, certainly in our campaigns, and I know Luke did in his campaigns, you know, we're communicating with specific user groups or constituencies. We're certainly going to deliver those outdoor recreation messages to them. But when we're communicating with the electorate overall, or we're deciding what, what messages are going to move our most important targets, as I was trying to describe in the Indian River County example.

We want to go to those messages that we know are strongest based on the public opinion research we've done. So that's that's how we get to that. I think, you know, if all of us had more money for education, you know, we had the kind of PR budgets that that major American corporations have I think we could probably move the needle on outdoor recreation as well. But most of our campaigns are relatively low budget affairs. Even this statewide campaign that Luke talked about in Texas was much smaller than what do you spend on a US Senate race or governor's race in Texas? So we want to make sure that with what little funding we have to convince voters to vote yes for conservation, that we're delivering those compelling messages. And those are, again about those higher level issues that take land conservation and recreation from sort of a luxury to a need.

Luke Metzger 53:07

Yeah, and I would add that, you know, again, I think this important, identify who your audience is, right, so if your audience is primarily outdoor recreation enthusiasts, absolutely. I think that's a compelling good message and you should lead with that and but then, again, for the broader general electorate, you want to certainly factor in, you know, what, what we think are the most compelling because, you know, in many cases, you're only gonna be able to run a 15 second or 32nd ad, right, and you can only get so much in there, but I think, you know, easy to pair on recreation with those those same core values. So you know, showing the the pictures of the the waters you know, and how important those are but ever fishermen on the side as well, you know, as I think he can, you can pair on some of those recreation messages too. Yeah, there's

Chris Perkins 53:54

one other part in that section of the report that I thought was interesting. It recommends being specific in talking about outdoor recreation mentioned hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, viewing wildlife or being enjoying nature. The more vivid the language, the more likely voters are to see themselves using these lands and enjoying their benefits. This is particularly true if examples of more passive recreation are included in the list, such as viewing wildlife or simply enjoying nature and not simply evoking an image of a gear laden, backpacker. Ricky geese asked a couple questions should we start to include initial infrastructure also in the land acquisition for state parks I suppose he's saying like in funding as its its land itself and the infrastructure required to facilitate recreation

Luke Metzger 54:47

Yeah, I mean, that worked out. Again, a depends on your goal, right? If and certainly for outdoor recreation community, get access, is that the key goal, right. And so in that case, that absolutely makes sense to work to get that infrastructure because like in the case of Texas, we have five state parks right now that aren't open to the public and in some cases, we've had in our hands for like 20 years, and they're just, you know, they haven't prioritized the funding to for that infrastructure and so they just haven't been opened. And so if you don't, you know, get it up front. You might not get it for, you know, a long way down. The road.

Chris Perkins 55:30

If the folks on this call, take nothing else away. What do you to hold as for to your work that you keep top of mind, no matter what campaign you're working on? What's the biggest piece of take home advice that you can lend to anyone working on a campaign whether it's public facing or behind the scenes with important decision makers?

Will Abberger 55:54

Go ahead, Lou.

Luke Metzger 55:55

Okay. Well, I've you know, I think again, you know, we'll pointed out earlier just, you know, the how bipartisan and land conservation is, and so remembering that and actively seeking out those alliances, you know, depends on the state, of course, you know, some states, you might not need Republicans to get your bill through the legislature, but certainly helpful and as he pointed out,

you know, the importance of winning hearts and minds, you know, Chris, you know, you can't do that if we're excluding, you know, a whole population of people. And so I think, remembering that and you know, actively, you know, working to engage, you know, key people and, you know, having having, being not being afraid to say what you need and articulating a bold vision, don't don't worry, don't worry too much that people are going to freak out and, and set you down, because many people will actually be will rally to that and be much more excited to work on the campaign if you are laying it out that bold vision.

Will Abberger 56:54

Yeah, you know, I think one important maxim that we always hold out in our work is we want our campaigns to be data driven. You know, we all have bring different assumptions and biases to our work about what is going to be important to, in our case, voters and I think understanding from Sam public opinion research. What it is it's important to voters and then communicating that to them is really one of the main keys to success. You know, Bill Clinton said it's the economy stupid, I say you know, it's a voter stupid. So

Chris Perkins 57:36

final questions from the group before we wrap. And well, I wanted to follow up you have in house public opinion research, but there are also firms that one could hire. Sorry, go.

Will Abberger 57:48

No, we don't. The feasibility research is done in house our public opinion research is all grayed out to professional pollsters got

Chris Perkins 57:57

it? And are there certain orgs that specialize in conservation related measures or do pollsters generally just take on any issue and conducted a survey? No, there

Will Abberger 58:09

are definitely a number of pollsters. We work with both Democratic and Republican pollsters who specializes in polling for ballot measures and even park and land conservation ballot measures.

Chris Perkins 58:17

Good to know I may follow up with you to see if there's a list of those Oryx anywhere to assist some of the folks on this call, sir, thank you all so much for joining Luke. Well, it's been such a pleasure to have you speak to this group. Everyone. Stay tuned for upcoming sessions from the confluence of states education series, and please send me a note if there are certain topics or speakers you'd love to bring to this group. Have an excellent rest of your Wednesday and talk to you soon. Thanks, Chris. Thanks, y'all.

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