

Chapter 3.3

Talking Growth: Crafting Effective Messages

Land use planning is an inherently complex subject, one that doesn't boil down easily into sound bites. However, the sound bite, or slogan, is the first opportunity for communication. From the bumper sticker to the pin on your lapel to the heading on your poster or lawn sign, your slogan is your "foot in the door" -- it is your first step in communicating your message to the decision makers and the public.

Once you have a slogan, you also want to create a campaign story. The story explains your campaign in a minute or two. It is the news release background, the elevator speech, the petition signing pitch. Once you have communicated your campaign story, you can layer in more information and detail when the setting is appropriate -- when you have more than a page or more than 2 minutes to communicate. But even when you do have more time or space to communicate, the slogan and story are the headlines and theme that effectively package and communicate your campaign.

So there is no excuse for talking like a policy wonk -- it only means that we as land use advocates have a greater challenge to get our point across to the public. One of the main reasons that more people don't get involved in local land use issues is that they don't take the time to understand all the planning jargon.

This chapter talks about

- a) How to craft effective slogans about land use in your community, so that everyday people take notice and know your effort.
- b) How to craft your story about the campaign, so those who don't understand planning law but care deeply about their community can be a part of your campaign.
- c) Choosing your messengers. Who delivers the message is 90% of the effectiveness of the message.

The importance of having ONE lead message and Slogan

There's an old rule in political organizing that you have to repeat the exact same message three times for people to hear it. Three times! And that's not to convince people, that's just to make them listen.

In our advertising-dominated world, we are bombarded by thousands of messages every day. As community organizers, we are competing for people's attention with TV, billboards, radio, newspapers, bumper stickers, fast-food signs, and many other sources of mental clutter.

We have the advantage of being local. Our effort impacts a community member's 'back yard.' Plus, we can knock on people's doors, talk to them in the supermarket, and put up lawn signs.

But nevertheless, it is critically important for your campaign to have a clear, strong slogan that is repeated over and over, in everything that you do, everywhere you go. If it isn't clear, it is hard to repeat. If it isn't repeated, it will never break through the cacophony of our media-saturated lives.

Anatomy of a Winning Campaign Slogan: Keep Tahoe Blue

Here in the Sierra we have a great example of a slogan: Keep Tahoe Blue. Who hasn't seen these ubiquitous blue bumper stickers all over the Sierra and California? Why has this message been so wildly successful?

"Keep Tahoe Blue" obeys all the rules of a good message:

- Values-based.
- Outcome-focused, not process-focused.
- Short and sweet.
- Clear.
- Solution-oriented, not problem-oriented.
- Inclusive.
- Simple visual with consistent colors, easy to identify at a glance.

Just think, would it be so well known if it was Stop Eutrophication in Lake Tahoe? Cease Development and Land Use Impacts Increasing Sediment and Pollutants to Lake Tahoe?

Let's break down each of these rules further, and apply them to land use processes.

Rule # 1: Values-based

In talking about land use, we often start by talking about the problem and the solution. However, all our communications should be based, first and foremost, on values.

Think about why you're organizing this campaign, why you are spending time and energy on this when you could be doing a million other things with your time. It's about your values. You're concerned about your town or county's future. You think development should benefit the community as a whole, not just a handful of developers and land speculators. You believe in the intrinsic value of open space and healthy air and water. You think decisions about growth should be made democratically, not behind closed doors. These are your values, and they are not just yours – most people feel the same way.

When you're developing your slogan, start by thinking what values you want to convey. Think of your values as the common ground that you establish between yourself and your audience. Once

you've established that common ground, your audience is more receptive to hearing your thoughts on the problem and the solution.

Rule # 2: Outcome-Focused, Not Process-Focused

As advocates and planning wonks, we have a tendency to talk about the planning process:
“The Planning Commission wants to upzone these 5,000 acres from 160s to 40s, which doesn't comply with the General Plan land use designation or the agricultural mitigation policy! Isn't that terrible?!”

Well, yes, to you and me that is terrible, because we know what you're talking about. To 99% of the people in your community, that statement is meaningless.

Focus on the outcome, not the process. In the example above, the process is the rezoning, while the outcome is that 5,000 acres of farmland will be lost to development.

Rule # 3: Short and Sweet

Let's face it, we have short attention spans. Your slogan should use as few words as possible, and those words should themselves be short and simple.

Rule # 4: Clear

Avoid jargon. Use words and phrases that ordinary people understand. Your meaning should be clear to anyone and everyone. For example, most people don't know what the word “sprawl” means, but they do understand “poorly-planned growth.” See the box below for suggestions on phrases to use, and those to avoid.

Another aspect of clarity is being specific about place. If the area you're concerned about has a name, use it. Instead of saying Save Ranchland, say Save Bear Creek Valley.

Phrases to Avoid	Phrases to Use
Ecosystems	Natural Areas
Biodiversity	Fish and Wildlife
Regulations & Laws	Safeguards, protections
Riparian	Creeks, rivers and lakes
Watershed	Land around rivers, creeks and lakes
Agricultural land	Farmland or ranchland, working landscapes
Urban sprawl	Poorly-planned growth, out of control growth, over-development
Habitat	Wildlife areas, homes for wildlife
Infill development, smart growth	Compact growth, historic small town growth patterns, downtown revitalization

Rule # 5. Solution-Oriented, Not Problem-Oriented.

Having a positive vision for the future is essential. It's important to explain the problem, but it is more inspiring to explain the solution. Can you imagine bumper stickers that say "Lake Tahoe is Polluted"?

Rule # 6: Inclusive.

Your slogan should appeal to the broadest audience possible. You don't need to live in Tahoe to believe that we should keep it blue. If you've ever driven past Lake Tahoe, or just seen it in photographs, you can understand the importance of protecting its beauty. Similarly, your slogan should appeal to a broad segment of your community, not just birders or cyclists or farmers or planning wonks.

Follow these rules and use your creativity and that of your group members to develop a slogan that will carry your campaign into the hearts of your community.

Tell the Story

Along with a slogan, you also need a story that is consistent, memorable and powerful. All of the rules that apply to slogans also apply to stories.

The basic elements of the story are:

Problem

What is the threat or problem that you are trying to address? Summarize it in one or two sentences. Remember to be specific, clear and outcome-focused.

Example: A proposed growth plan would pave 15,000 acres of forests and ranchlands and dump 3,000 more cars on our already-congested roads every day.

Solution

What should be done to solve the problem? Sometimes the proposed land use project is a no-brainer, like a cyanide heap leach mine or new mega-resort development in an environmentally sensitive area. In those cases, the solution might just be no way, no how, never. But most land use battles are about development our communities need and/or want, such as housing, retail, cell phone towers, tourism attractions, etc. The question is – where, how and how much? In these cases, it's important to articulate a vision for how this growth can be appropriate, rather than just saying no. What is the alternative?

Example: Instead of destroying our forests and ranchlands, the County should direct growth into towns like Oak City or Yuba Valley. This will put housing and jobs closer together, reduce traffic and protect our economy and rural character.

Urgency

Why should your audience worry about this right now, and take action to do something about it? Is the threat about to become a reality? Is there an opportunity to get the solution implemented?

Example: Next month, the County Board of Supervisors will vote on a plan that decides how our County will grow over the next ten years. So it's a really important time for all of us to speak up about how we want our community to grow.

Strategy

What is your strategy for getting the solution to happen? In other words, who are you asking to do what?

Example: Citizens for a Rural Mariyuba is asking the County to adopt an alternative plan that would protect open space, while still allowing needed growth in appropriate places, like downtown Yuba Valley.

Action

What can people do to help? Specifically, what can the person on the other end of this conversation do?

Example: We're trying to get 1,000 people to write a letter to the Board of Supervisors, and 100 people to attend the hearing next month. Your letter or presence at the hearing would really make a difference.

Choose Your Messenger

The messenger is as important as the message itself. This is true for all aspects of a campaign, from written materials to lobbying to working with the media. Your messenger should be someone who is credible, trustworthy and likeable to the particular audience he or she is addressing. Who would the local Sierra Club chapter trust? How about the local farm bureau? How about the average community member that is looking at your campaign literature?

There are very few individuals who would be considered credible and likeable by everyone, so you will need to choose carefully, and recruit/cultivate several different spokespeople to represent your campaign. Your chances of convincing your target audience – be it a potential coalition partner or County Supervisor or ordinary community member – will be much greater if they like your messenger.

Your messenger need not be someone that the audience already knows – although it is great if they do. However, the messenger should be able to establish credibility by talking about who they are and what they value. Think carefully about who will be the most trusted, respected messenger for that particular task.

Having a stable of diverse messengers is yet another reason to build a broad-based coalition: the broader your coalition, the more messengers you have to choose from!

Some Final Thoughts About Message

Know your audience: Your message may vary somewhat depending upon your audience. Are you speaking to elected officials, the media, or a farm bureau meeting? Your core message should remain the same, but your emphasis can and should reflect the interests and priorities of your audience.

When in doubt, poll. Polling is a very useful tool for determining what message (and messenger) resonates most within your particular community or constituency. Polling is expensive, but if you are planning to put a lot of resources into a campaign, it's an upfront investment that will pay off in the long run. If polling is beyond your financial reach, you can still apply the same basic principle by doing mass outreach in your community, whether through a mailed survey, phone banking, tabling at community events, and other kinds of outreach described in Chapter 3.5.

Test your message on somebody “normal.” Remember that as community organizers and planning wonks, we are freaks (you know what we mean). The rest of the world isn't immersed in issues and politics the way we are. For this reason, it is extremely helpful to test your message on someone outside your activist circle. When Land Use Coordinator Autumn Bernstein first started organizing around land use, she was living with her 82-year-old grandmother, who became Autumn's sounding board for messages. Autumn's grandmother didn't know anything about planning, but she loved birds and the huge old oak tree that grew outside her window, and she, like most people, had an inherent sense of fairness and democracy.

Don't just develop a message – deliver it! Crafting a message is a fun and creative process, and it often leads to lively – and lengthy – discussions within your group. But remember that developing the message is only 10% -- the other 90% is getting it out there. Set aside time at one or two meetings to develop your message. If that's not enough time, appoint a subcommittee to finish the job, and move on. The next chapter describes how to create materials such as fact sheets and lawn signs to start getting your message out there.