



YOUR MISSION MAXIMIZED

WHAT'S YOUR IMPACT?

HOW AKRON ZOO LEVERAGED AN ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY TOWARDS HUGE PUBLIC INVESTMENT

OPPORTUNITY

In 2015, Doug Piekarz, newly named President and CEO of the Akron Zoo, prioritized the need to demonstrate the foundational importance of the Zoo to the greater Akron community. As a first step, he moved to develop an economic impact statement (EIS) to reposition the Zoo as one of the most impactful organizations in its region. This statement was a chief element of the Zoo's three-pronged approach for an eventual request for a levy renewal and increase. Mr. Piekarz knew that without the increase, the Zoo's ability to deliver on its bold mission would be adversely effected.

As Mr. Piekarz identified the groups that the Zoo would need to influence during the tax levy campaign—elected officials, the Chamber of Commerce, business leaders, and civic leaders—he knew that an economic impact statement would be of paramount importance to address questions on how to measure the value of their community asset.

As a follow-up to the strategic plan Zoo Advisors had helped develop for the Zoo, Piekarz engaged Zoo Advisors to facilitate the development of the EIS and provide strategic consulting services throughout the process.

SOLUTION

Once the EIS had been developed, compiling nearly a decade of operating data, the Zoo shared the outcomes during its "State of the Zoo" public presentation. Over subsequent years, the Zoo gained insight and feedback from elected officials and other local leaders. The most impactful message developed by the project team was **for every \$1 of public funds invested at the Zoo, approximately \$8 was returned to the community's economy in the form of economic impact, jobs supported, and taxes for government.** In an area of Ohio with few economic engines, the consensus was to focus on and elevate arts and culture as an economic driver, which included Akron Zoo. However, at the time, the Zoo was the lowest tax-supported organization in the county. In fact, it had been 20 years since the Zoo had requested or received any sort of a levy increase. Yet, those nine years of data proved that the Zoo's economic impact was almost three quarters of a billion dollars!

The economic impact study is so critical to our profession.

-Linda Criss, VP of Communications

The Zoo now had the support it needed to begin campaigning for the tax levy and returned to the economic impact study as evidence to share with influential audiences who would endorse the levy.

But then the pandemic unfolded, and the Zoo was temporarily shut down. Despite a suddenly volatile social and political environment, the Zoo needed to continue to campaign in preparation for the election.



The study was invaluable, enabling us to secure hundreds of endorsements.

-Doug Piekarz, President & CEO



A voter survey was issued, where **the Zoo was pleased to learn that its economic impact was a much greater priority for voters than it had been previously**, likely due to elevated economic uncertainty. The public was influenced by the number of jobs the Zoo supported and how many other businesses were dependent on the Zoo to keep their own businesses thriving. The economic impact research and statement were invaluable in credibly and definitively answering these concerns and **positioning the Zoo as a beacon of economic strength in the community.**

The Zoo promoted the “\$1 to \$8” message in all its campaign materials and called on influencers to prepare PSAs (including Dan Ashe of AZA and the President of the Akron City Council) as they campaigned to specific groups they needed to garner support. **Because the EIS had been annually revised and in circulation for five years prior, elected officials were comfortable with it and amenable to endorsement throughout the campaign.** And for those anti-tax groups who needed persuasion, the Zoo’s message of creating and giving back to the municipality through job creation and \$2.5 million of acquired capital support every year was the message that resonated.

The Zoo’s tireless work led to over 270 public endorsements from community leaders and government officials for the requested levy, and **with a strong public understanding of the economic value the Zoo had to the community, the levy issue headed to the public ballot.**

RESULTS

On the evening of Election Day, November 3rd, 2020, Akron Zoo announced that Issue 47, **the Akron Zoo tax levy, passed with an astounding 59% approval at the ballot.** Doug Piekarz remarked, “All I want to say is thank you. Thank you for your trust in us. This is a fantastic opportunity for all people of Summit County, for the economic driver that the Akron Zoo is.” **The 0.8 mill levy increase will now provide the Akron Zoo approximately \$5 million in additional public investment, in addition to the \$8.5 million they already receive for at least the next 10 years.**

Every public dollar invested in your organization and facility returns multiple times over in your city, county, and state.

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