

## **POLITICS AS USUAL UPENDED; I-695 DEFIES HEAVY HITTERS**

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Defiant voters shunned the advice of the establishment and ignored a final blitz of attack ads as they blessed **Initiative 695** and demanded one of the most dramatic shifts in public policy this state has ever seen.

Washington's widely despised 2.2 percent car tax will be abolished and replaced with a flat \$30 fee for all vehicles on Jan.

1. But the more momentous change may be that other future tax or fee increases will require voter approval, giving taxpayers far more control of their state, county and city governments.

**I-695** turned Washington's political conventions upside down. It won at the polls despite being outspent almost sevenfold by the opposition campaign. It was led by an irreverent wristwatch salesman, not a veteran political operative. And it succeeded despite the fact that the most powerful companies in the state hated it.

Yet all the warnings about the dire consequences of passage - such as claims that it would worsen traffic and yank police officers off the street - weren't enough to convince voters that the state couldn't handle an annual cut of about \$750 million from a \$10.3 billion budget.

"It was the triumph of reason over fear," said Randy Elmore, a Bellingham window washer enjoying the **I-695** victory party at the Bellevue Hyatt last night. "We gave the government a little spanking tonight. They need to have a little respect for the people who are paying for everything."

**I-695** may have provided all the anti-establishment venting the electorate needed. In most other elections, incumbents and mainstream candidates and issues prevailed:

Statewide, voters rejected **Initiative 696**, which would have eliminated much commercial fishing in Washington waters. The measure was opposed by a broad spectrum of environmental and industry groups.

In King County, incumbent Democrats Greg Nickels and Larry Phillips cruised to re-election, while Republican David Irons Jr.

fought off the write-in campaign waged by his anti-growth candidate sister, Di Irons.

In Seattle, Heidi Wills, backed by business and Democratic Party regulars, defeated iconoclast Charlie Chong for the City Council. Also elected to the council were incumbents Margaret Pageler and Peter Steinbrueck and longtime television pundit Jim Compton. Judy Nicaastro held a slim lead over Cheryl Chow.

Five counties vote no

**I-695** was wildly popular across most of the state, winning in 34 of the 39 counties. King was the only populous county in which it trailed. It also was trailing in San Juan, Whatcom, Whitman and Garfield counties.

Two out of every three voters in Benton, Clark, Franklin and other counties bordering Oregon - where car-license tabs cost just \$30 for every two years - supported the **initiative**. Support was at similar levels in Pierce and Yakima counties.

Cary Condotta knew Wenatchee would go for the **initiative** as soon as the farmers backed it.

"They took the lead and the rest of Wenatchee followed," said Condotta, who pushed the **initiative** there. "Everybody was looking for a little bit of relief."

Many I-**695** supporters said taxes are too high. And, like Ballard teacher Kate Kuczkowski, they thought it was time to create a stir.

"Politicians are so against it, let's give them a little chaos in their lives," Kuczkowski said. "What I'm hearing are a bunch of dancing politicians, their purse strings pulled up tight."

Florence Shelton, who lives at an apple orchard in Walla Walla County, said the **initiative** caught her in a surly mood.

"I'm just unhappy right now. I have voted for levies all my life, had six children, volunteered, and tried to do my part. This year, I just got grumpy."

People at the No on **695** party last night at the Labor Temple in Seattle struggled to explain what happened. Many said

anti-government sentiments ran deeper than they realized.

"We need to build a government the people trust," said Michael Vaska, a Seattle attorney who tried to articulate the case against I-**695** in debates across Western Washington.

Vaska also said he was glad I-**695** was challenged so aggressively. "If we didn't stand up against this thing, every two-bit demagogue with a tin horn would try something," he said.

Campaign took off quietly

I-**695** got off to a quiet start in January, without more than a passing wince from legislators who thought they'd already solved the car-tax problem with a \$30-a-year cut per vehicle in 1998.

The **initiative**'s sponsor, Tim Eyman of Mukilteo, was seen by many as little more than a naive gadfly. He'd tried a similar **initiative** the year before and failed to collect enough signatures to qualify for the ballot.

But Eyman, a boyish mail-order entrepreneur who sells fraternity and sorority wristwatches, created a volunteer network that managed to collect the second-most signatures in state history without people paid to gather them.

Despite the startling 514,000 signatures the campaign gathered, conventional wisdom still indicated support for the ballot measure would plummet once people learned more about its "meat-ax approach," as Gov. Gary Locke described it.

And before the Washington State Republican Party got off the fence and endorsed it in August, the **initiative's** biggest political backers were the state's Libertarian and American Heritage parties.

The No on **695** campaign looked formidable in the beginning. It featured the unusual alliance of the two most-powerful lobbying forces in Olympia: the Association of Washington Business and the Washington State Labor Council. It also had the backing of environmentalists, the League of Women Voters and many others.

And it ultimately raised almost \$2 million - more than six times the \$290,000 Eyman collected. Boeing, Microsoft and Weyerhaeuser each contributed at least \$60,000 to fight the **initiative**.

As part of the "education" campaign, voters were told repeatedly that passing I-**695** would derail \$2.4 billion in slated transportation projects throughout Washington and gut city and county police, fire, transit and health budgets. King County Metro and other transit agencies warned voters they would lose 25 percent of their budgets, and that bus routes would be cut and drivers fired.

Little of the message seemed to resonate as No on **695** struggled to shape a simple cogent reason to reject the ballot measure.

"We never found a silver-bullet message," said Mark Funk, spokesman for No on **695**.

Jim Kneeland, consultant to **695** opponents, said, "Because the **initiative** is so broad, it made it hard to focus. Our campaign had to be based on people's sense for community."

No on **695** avoided putting any politicians in its ads, or even urging them to work the campaign trail. "This was not an effort where we wanted politicians to be out there saying, 'Save our money,'" Kneeland said.

In hindsight, Kneeland wishes the campaign had stressed that I-**695** was spearheaded by extremists.

"We gave them credibility for being mainstream, but they weren't," he said.

Eyman says opposition backfired

While the opposition group ruled the television and radio airwaves, the low-budget I-**695** campaign stuck to yard signs and mass mailings. And Eyman was ever-present in an uncluttered election season. He debated former Gov. Mike Lowry, Secretary of State Ralph Munro and others in more than 15 duels across the state.

He looked convincing as the unintimidated outsider against "the suits," as he called them, rattling off simple arguments about how it was high time the state give a break to "the little guy."

Eyman says the opposition campaign backfired. "Their message was apocalypse," he said. "And the people didn't believe it."

Even the efforts of the state's biggest and most-influential company backfired, from Eyman's perspective. "Boeing stepped forward and said, 'We don't like this,'" Eyman said, "and the people said, 'Hey, who cares what you think?'"

As the I-**695** party wound down last night, an exhausted Eyman was asked what he would do next. After

saying his immediate plans included a long nap, he said the room full of supporters had provided plenty of suggestions for his next crusade.

"Thanks to this crowd, I now have, I think, 180 ideas for new initiatives," he said.

Erma Turner of Cle Elum had Eyman sign her handmade I-**695** poster with a picture of Locke crying. Eyman signed it: "Sorry, Gary, the people wanted I-**695**. Go to work!!!"

"Tim could probably be governor," Turner said. "He did something nobody thought possible."