

BACKGROUND:

Voters in the city of Biddeford elect a mayor, all nine members of the city council and seven members of the school committee every two years. The city is well-known for its “rough and tumble” political structure.

Alan Casavant, a recently retired high-school teacher and a former city councilor, decided that he wanted to challenge a two-term incumbent for the mayor’s seat. At the height of an economic recession that hit this former mill town hard, Mayor Joanne Twomey became the principal spokesperson and supporter of a proposed casino facility, which was overwhelmingly supported by the community as a way to create much needed jobs and tax revenue.



Casavant, who was also serving his third term as a state representative, publicly raised questions and concerns about the proposed facility, including his perception about a strong connection between the project developers and the mayor’s office.

Casavant asked me to coordinate and help manage what he expected to be an uphill campaign to oust an incumbent with a proven track record of successful campaigning.

CHALLENGES:

- In a community that historically struggled with perceptions of class warfare, Casavant was perceived as a well-to-do former educator. Opponents immediately labeled him as being “out-of-touch” with the needs of the community’s “working-class” citizens.
- Casavant previously served on the city council in the 1980s when a fateful decision was made to build and develop a trash-to-energy incinerator in the center of the downtown area, near some abandoned mill buildings. Casavant, in fact, made the motion to approve the location of the proposed facility that later became a public policy nightmare.
- Twomey was perceived to have the support of those who favored the proposed casino. She had the bully pulpit advantage and won prior elections, including stints on the city council and four terms in the Maine House of Representatives, by respectable margins.

TACTICS:

We immediately assembled a team of well-known community members to assist with the campaign.

Throughout the campaign, this all-volunteer team remained coordinated and on-message. We positioned Casavant as a lifelong resident with a vision and a “positive, professional” approach to revitalize a community hard-hit by an economic recession and the challenges of a shifting global manufacturing landscape.



We identified and recruited supporters from every pocket of the community, and we leveraged social media tools to their full potential.

We worked the doors hard and hammered our message to those who feared that Casavant would crush their hopes of a casino: *“When it comes time to negotiate with the developers, Biddeford needs a quarterback, not a cheerleader.”*

RESULT:

On Election Day, Biddeford voters overwhelmingly supported the proposed casino but they also shouted for new leadership by ousting the incumbent mayor by a margin of **62-38 percent**.

“The voters did not speak tonight, Casavant told a crowd of supporters at his election night headquarters. “They shouted.”

Statewide, voters ultimately rejected the proposed casino in Biddeford, but the media took note that approximately the same number of Biddeford voters who supported the proposal also supported the candidate who was one of its most outspoken critics.