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You are here: US > Search > PR powering property battle

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PR powering property battle

Craig McGuire - 8 May 2006 11:00

After the 1996 closing of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center that employed more than 1,500 residents, the New London, CT, economy had declined steadily.

Consequently, local developers hatched a plan to turn 90 acres of waterfront property into office buildings, upscale housing, and a marina near a \$300 million research facility Pfizer was building.

The problem: Owners of 15 homes on 1.54 acres of the proposed site refused to sell out, including Susette Kelo, a resident who had just completed extensive remodeling.

When the US Supreme Court decided in September 2005 to hear Kelo v. City of New London, the Institute for Justice (IJ), the public interest law firm litigating the case, seized the platform to advance the issue nationally.

Strategy

Without Kelo v. City of New London, IJ wouldn't have had the news hook it needed to mount a media campaign.

"From the time the case was accepted until it was argued, media coverage of the issue only increased," says John Kramer, IJ's VP for communications. "The whole nation was awakening to the fact that courts were allowing the government to take someone's home just so someone else who had political influence could make more money off the land."

After the Supreme Court accepted the case, IJ set out to show that eminent domain - the government's power to take private property, give the owner "just compensation," and use the land for public use - was being abused.

Tactics

IJ targeted more than 400 journalists: those who covered the US Supreme Court and local reporters in communities where eminent domain abuse was occurring. To expedite the information-gathering process, IJ developed a detailed backgrounder on the Kelo case and a policy paper spotlighting abuses state-by-state.

IJ also overhauled its Web site to include case pages, presenting information in an easy-to-follow, modular design with photos of homeowners, legal briefs and decisions, maps and charts, and links to Op-Eds and news stories.

Demonstrating real-world consequences, IJ encouraged the media to visit New London and meet with the seven families who were fighting to save their homes.

On the day IJ argued before the Supreme Court in February, the group brought all of its

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clients to meet with national reporters and once again tell their stories.

IJ also coordinated more than two dozen local rallies in communities where governments were abusing eminent domain.

Results

The culmination was a 5-4 decision in June 2005 to uphold eminent domain. Though it lost in court, IJ probably realized much greater coverage with the unfavorable ruling. That day alone, it fielded 500 calls from reporters.

Visits to www.IJ.org increased 60%, and membership in IJ's Castle Coalition - a grassroots advocacy group - increased 50%. Among the outlets that visited the New London families during the effort were Associated Press, *CBS Sunday Morning*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Financial Times*, *LA Times*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Future

Within two days of the decision, IJ launched "Hands Off My Home," a \$3 million effort funded through voluntary contributions to warn the public about eminent domain abuse, litigate in state courts, and pursue legislative reform.

"We will continue to battle against eminent domain and will launch campaigns leveraging the power of PR," Kramer says.

PRWeek's view

If you stacked clips one on top of the other for this campaign, the pile would be more than 5 inches high. How was a relatively small public interest law firm able to garner such interest, especially with only two media relations people facing an army of deep-pocket developers?

Simple: dramatic messaging.

Even in defeat, or more likely because of it, IJ succeeded because of a compelling theme - with real-life examples - that the government at any time could seize your home.

PR team: Institute for Justice (Arlington, VA)

Campaign: The Fight Against Eminent Domain Abuse

Duration: September 2005 - ongoing

Budget: \$5,000

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