

KEEP ST. PAUL HOME



12 Narrative Takeaways



Knowing when to say “Go!”

A ballot initiative is a big lift and rent stabilization is a controversial policy. HENS had built significant momentum and trusting relationships among organizations during a year-long, citywide effort to secure the passage of the state’s strongest tenant protections ordinance. After strategic internal conversations, HENS publicly launched the rent stabilization campaign at the victory party for the tenant protections win.



Dreaming our campaign brand

The right framing for the campaign was critical. HENS contracted with a local narrative strategist to help a group of nearly 20 leaders from coalition organizations representing a wide diversity of constituents and neighborhoods to dream together. Instead of starting from the problem, we time traveled with a visioning exercise that led us to a future where our goals for housing justice had been achieved. We started from the joy we would experience when we won, rather than the challenges we had to overcome to get there. That led us to incorporate warm colors, rooted imagery, and a bright heart in our logo and center “home” not “rent control” in our campaign name.



Creating clear expectations and shared agreements

Group projects are hard. Although we shared a common goal of passing a rent stabilization ordinance, we knew that each organization would be entering this work with different positional power, political analysis and long-term goals. We co-created a set of community agreements that directly addressed potential points of tension and conflict, some of which was informed by past conflicts. In it, we clearly named expectations around: accountability, race and power analysis, sharing/taking credit, capacity, policy agendas and confidentiality. This made it possible for people to think through decisions that would impact the coalition and reflect on potential impacts before acting, and hopefully preventing harm.



Adopting Race Class Narrative

Our campaign needed a diversity of voices singing the same tune to make our campaign stand out — and stick — in the noisy civic and media landscape. To do that, we explicitly adopted Race Class Narrative — a proven messaging structure and strategy that has had success in mobilizing multi-racial constituencies for progressive electoral wins — as our communications framework and shared resources (like a Narrative Toolkit) with our supporters to get buy-in across the coalition. It worked. We saw our common refrain repeated by folks all over the city.



“Not all landlords” — naming the villains

Our campaign goal was explicit: to eliminate “egregious rent spikes” and “predatory practices” that exploit and displace our neighbors who rent their homes. We were clear that our policy does NOT target responsible local “mom-and-pop” property owners who care about our community and their tenants but rather “corporate and predatory landlords” — a phrase we used repeatedly to make that clear distinction — who are actually making it MORE difficult for local residents to provide housing in St. Paul. In our materials, we explicitly highlighted how our policy would benefit local landlords and included the images and voices of supportive property owners in our media strategy, print materials and online content.



Revealing motives to make the choice clear — people or profits?

It wasn't enough to name WHO is harming our neighbors but WHY they are doing it. We constantly underscored that a 3% annual cap on rent increases is both reasonable and commensurate with regional trends over the past 20 years, so those opposing our campaign were fighting for landlords rights to "unlimited profits" and unfettered "predatory practices." We drew a bright line between the monied "landlord lobby" — which spent more than \$5 million to defeat the measure with misinformation and scare tactics — and the many local residents, respected community organizations and leaders who supported our campaign because they love our city and care about their neighbors.



Cutting turf to win the policy — and advance racial justice

Our electoral system is flawed, and we knew that voter turnout for residents most deeply impacted by housing instability would be lower than we needed it to be. However, that didn't mean we only focused on voter engagement efforts for the usual suspects. Racial justice was central to both our field plan and the message we shared on the ground. In turf that was disproportionately white, wealthy and homeowner, we uplifted the intersection between housing justice and racial justice. In dividing our turf, we made sure that organizations who were more grounded in low-wealth, BIPOC bases focused their voter turnout efforts in renter-heavy neighborhoods. Who the messenger was was just as important as what the message was.



Centering stories to cultivate solidarity

From billboards to postcards, we featured St. Paul residents in ALL our communications. While the opposition used tacky stock photography and clip art in their mailers and ads, our campaign materials made people smile and say, "Oh look! That's my friend in the picture!" We prioritized the stories of renters — from longer op-eds in major newspapers to photos on social media — while also emphasizing that this policy benefits ALL of us. We worked with allied homeowners, local landlords and elected officials to show solidarity across race, neighborhood, and housing tenure.



Spending money to boost our message

Our campaign worked hard to craft messaging that resonated specifically with St. Paul voters, built on a strong foundation of Race Class Narrative — the next step was to make sure those messages reached our target audiences! With that in mind, we built a paid media strategy for digital advertising on Facebook, Instagram, Hulu, YouTube, Google Search, and the Pioneer Press (St. Paul's local paper). We segmented our target audiences in a way that corresponded with our field plan, knowing that certain messages would resonate best with specific St. Paul voters. For instance, when targeting ads to more moderate, frequent voters, we relied heavily on content that demonstrated solidarity between landlords, renters, and homeowners for rent stabilization. In our ad strategy for renters, we used content that foregrounded renter voices. Through message testing, honing our targeting, and strategic timing, we were able to execute a paid media strategy that was impactful and cost-efficient.



Knowing when to push back — and how

We knew it played to the opposition to spend our energy rebutting — and thus, repeating — their arguments against our policy. While we ALWAYS stayed focused on the positive vision and the benefits of rent stabilization, we crafted responses to specific opposition talking points in a Pivot Document that allowed us to respond in constructive ways. We provided extensive FAQs and research on our website so those with a genuine curiosity to learn had a resource for education. By naming the villains in our overarching narrative we implicitly pushed back on the predictable landlord opposition, but we also had to inoculate against the potential electoral impact of a small but insidious group of white urbanists who claimed the policy would backfire. In direct response, through two op-eds and several social media posts, we named not only the flaws in logic but the white supremacy inherent in the assumptions and accusations.



Enhancing credibility with support from elected officials

From our fruitful conversations on the doors and phones, we could tell that the majority of residents were supportive of rent stabilization. And yet — we could also sense that for a policy so specific and technical, many voters wanted to be able to count on the people they usually look to for policy-making: elected officials. We had the support of two Councilmembers plus the Mayor of St. Paul, and decided that getting endorsements from state legislators would be critical, not just for moving voters but also for placing additional pressure on the remaining five Councilmembers. Legislators spoke to how rent stabilization supported and complemented other housing policies for which they were advocating.



Putting the record on repeat

In a time where many of us experience information overload and a variety of interests compete for our attention, we recognized the importance of putting our message on repeat. One of our key strategies throughout the Keep St. Paul Home campaign was layering different modes of communications to create multiple touchpoints with voters. This meant that we infused our overall Race Class Narrative messaging into our field scripts, our emails, our SMS and phone scripts, our social media, our paid media, our press conferences, and more. Voters need to be exposed to a message more than once for it to land, so instead of trying to reinvent the wheel with every new post or script, we stuck to our common refrains. Our Narrative Toolkit helped members of the coalition practice this message discipline and speak with a collective voice.

Many thanks to the countless St. Paulites who shared their stories to help us #KeepStPaulHome.



Follow our ongoing work!

