



Case Study

Openlands - Lakeshore Preserve

Fundraising Campaign Raises Over \$10 Million to create new natural and cultural destination.



Situation:

One of the country's oldest and most successful regional conservation organizations, Openlands has helped save thousands of open space acres in Illinois but it never owned property before accepting the challenge to protect 77-acres, once part of Fort Sheridan military base in Lake County.

The natural area would have been developed for private use unless a nonprofit agreed to restore the land that includes one mile of Lake Michigan shoreline, rare ravine ecosystems and upland bluffs. As a military base, the land was off limits to the public for more than 100 years. Openlands accepted the challenge to raise funds, restore the land and open it to the public as the new Openlands Lakeshore Preserve.

Launching its first capital campaign to raise \$10 million for restoration and \$3 million for an endowment, Openlands needed a public debut of the Preserve that would generate excitement and to help raise funds.

SNP and the Public Communications Inc. (PCI) partnered together to assist Openlands' three- person external affairs and development staff. SNP designed and implemented a Campaign Plan, with the leadership of Openlands while PCI provided pro bono PR and communications counsel.

With limited resources and time, the planning team researched what type of opening could attract the public to the Preserve and also help raise funds without reducing support for Openlands' annual luncheon in October.

Action:

Communication planning began right away, including researching competing events and assessing construction project timelines. The team decided it would plan and promote two very distinctive events in order to attract different audiences, including donors, families, educators, neighbors, elected officials, and regional media. The events the team identified were: 1) a free, family-friendly opening to draw visitors to experience the Preserve through accessible trails, tours of custom art installations, and nature education activities; and 2) an extraordinary, French-themed fundraising event – La Grande Preserve, titled after the famous Georges Seurat painting “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte” – to draw high-end donors to the Preserve.

Because the dates were set for September 10 and 11, a major challenge was that the date was also the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 memorial. After consulting several groups, including the commander of the U.S. Navy (that donated the land to Openlands) and Senator Mark Kirk, who helped facilitate the land transfer, it was determined the 9/11 date could work if communications/fundraising were managed with sensitivity.

An important resource for Openlands is its board of directors. These volunteers played a key role in generating a word-of-mouth “buzz” about the Preserve opening, and they were charged with driving gala ticket sales to new audiences. To keep the board inspired and informed, the team offered board tours of the preserve to see the “work in progress” and provided continual communications via board email and listserv to keep energizing board member efforts.

Buzz about the opening weekend was also created through social and traditional media, reaching additional audiences outside of key stakeholders. Openlands used Facebook and Twitter to provide continual project updates and strategic messages about work at the Preserve. The Openlands website also became a detailed resource about the Preserve including maps and directions, podcasts, features on art installations, the history and other information written to help the public understand the importance of this Preserve and to invite the public to visit.

Other key tactics of the communication plan included:

- Giving media sneak peak tours beginning in July;
- Including grand opening news in all Openlands materials, including its annual report and quarterly newsletter the “Openlander;”
- Using Public Service Announcements for radio, media alerts, and specific pitches to select reporters;
- Creating a brochure and branded communication tools to support the opening and to tell the Preserve story.

Opening day’s free activities for families included a nature hunt, tours of art installations, kite flying, live birds of prey demonstrations, crafts and refreshments. The following day *The La Grande Preserve* benefit began with a moment of silence in recognition of the 9/11 memorial. It featured an elegantly tented area at the top of the bluff

replicating a French-themed picnic in the park designed to attract major donors and recognize the contributions of the Hamill Family that heavily supported the Preserve capital campaign.

The team also publicized the opening day, The La Grande Preserve benefit and the annual luncheon simultaneously in August and September. The team then made a special publicity push for the Openlands luncheon in October. Just five weeks later, the luncheon drew attendance equal to the prior year and lost no sponsors. Post event coverage of the gala appeared in several key society media with photos of festively dressed guests.

Results:

The communication plan and programs enabled Openlands to meet and exceed all goals for the Preserve opening:

1. The Campaign attracted a \$4 million gift from the Grand Victoria Foundation to support restoration and another \$2 million gift from the Hamill Family Foundation to name the upland trail. In total, the Campaign raised over \$12 million;
2. More than 500 people, including Sen. Mark Kirk, attended the grand opening celebration on Sept. 10. Good weather and targeted publicity helped the event exceed the attendance goal by 100;
3. On Sept. 11, the La Grande Preserve benefit gala drew 354 guests paying \$500 each. It raised more than \$300,000 for the Preserve's capital campaign, exceeding the event fundraising goal by \$50,000;
4. Media outreach included 55 articles, news briefs and interviews, reaching an estimated audience of more than 4 million people;
5. An assessment of the media coverage and messages clearly distinguished Openlands from the local Lake Forest Open Lands, another important goal;
6. In October, five weeks after the opening weekend festivities, the Openlands annual luncheon in downtown Chicago drew 720 people - the same attendance it had during a record year in 2010, and it lost no sponsors to the Preserve gala.