

Northampton Organizers Summarize "Bring Our War Dollars Home" Campaign

by Carl Moos and Sally Weiss

Northampton is a city of about 30,000 in western Massachusetts. It is governed by a Mayor and a nine-member City Council.

This campaign to Bring Our War Dollars Home was led by Dr. Martha Nathan with the help of many members of the Alliance for Peace and Justice of Western Mass.

Petitioning: We heard about the "Bring Our War Dollars Home" campaign which was started in 2009 by Bruce Gagnon in Maine. From the website of the National Priorities Project (www.nationalpriorities.org), we extracted the dollar cost of the war for our small city (which was easily done with the sophisticated software that NPP has set up). Then in April we were able to draft a resolution based on the original one from Maine and took it as a petition to the streets, the farmers' markets, even at the town dump. We were impressed by the eagerness of many citizens to add their signatures as a way to express their chagrin with the war. When we had 300 signatures, we approached some friendly members of the City Council, who agreed to sponsor the measure in the Council. It was introduced at a mid-June Council meeting, and we mobilized many of our supporters to speak in the "public comment period" of the meeting, including veterans from IVAW and VFP, some of whom had served in Iraq or Afghanistan and spoke against the wars. Some other local military personnel spoke against our resolution. The City Council decided to refer it to three committees of the Council and to call for a Public Forum on the question.

Throughout the entire period, we continued the petition drive, finally ending with about 1,250 names. The campaign was further fueled by our writing op-eds and letters to the editor in the local daily paper. Contrary opinions appeared as well. The newspaper lent editorial space, not taking sides but in support of the community engaging with such a vital topic as war, peace, and the expenditure of the taxes of local citizens.

Public Forum: The forum was one of the best outcomes of the campaign. It was chaired by the mayor; a lot of citizens spoke. Many facets of what is a controversial idea – curtailing money for an ongoing war – were aired. It

became a true community dialogue. We supporters of the resolution were in the majority in the audience, but the mayor insisted on dissenters being given a respectful hearing. The newspaper gave good coverage of the Public Forum, and it was broadcast by community TV and our local low-power radio station.

City Council Action: It was time for the voting in City Council. The three committees had reported back (two pro and one con). There were a couple of delays due to absences of key Council members. We kept on coming to Council meetings, bringing in more petitions, and using the public comment period. Responding to concerns expressed at the Public Forum and in consultation with us, two Councilors amended the Resolution to add explicit language calling for bringing the troops home as well as the dollars, and adding concerns about respect for soldiers and veterans' care. The first Council vote on the final amended resolution came in at 6-2-1; the required second and final vote will occur on October 7. The Mayor and the Council will then be instructed to deliver the War Dollars Resolution to our members of Congress: Sens. John Kerry and Scott Brown, and Rep. Richard Neal (MA-2). [*The City Council resolution is attached - Ed.*]

Community Follow-up: A call for a more informal and extended discussion format was called for by several speakers at the Public Forum. Our Alliance took up that call. Two intimate meetings between two members of the peace community and a few veterans' families – an exquisitely delicate dialogue – have occurred and will continue.

Regional Outreach: Members of our Alliance for Peace and Justice who live in nearby cities and towns of western Massachusetts are rewriting the petitions and beginning to gather signatures. It is heartening that other calls will go out to Bring Our War Dollars Home. We are happy for this chance to explain the War Dollars campaign through the national networking of UFPJ and PDA.

Lessons learned: It was a long campaign, with ups and downs. We needed to be in it for the long haul because it consumed five months of steadfast organizing.

Using the remarkably easy system of the National Priorities Project (www.nationalpriorities.org) to determine the cost of war over these last nine years for each locality was essential to defining “the war dollars”.

Talking to anti-war veterans and getting their engagement in the process was vital.

Contacting and lobbying members of the City Council in advance was important to getting them engaged and knowledgeable about the campaign and therefore to the ultimate success of the measure. Diligent efforts were needed as well to get so much coverage in the local press.

Whether we won or lost the final vote, a key valuable outcome of the effort was the prolonged time of having the question of our war dollars before the public, getting many people thinking and talking with their family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors, and therefore being willing to participate in the Public Forum.

-- Submitted by Sally Weiss and Carl Moos, members of the Alliance for Peace and Justice of Western Mass., and of the End the War and Occupation "IOT" of Progressive Democrats of America.