Legislative Advocacy Basics

Advocacy Primers (remember they are designed for a specific audience so we must modify)

Our Basic Guide Form before trips:

The following suggestions will help ensure that your meeting is productive:

Before

\* Schedule an appointment in advance by calling your member of Congress’s scheduler. Be firm in your request to see the member. If you have trouble getting time to see the member, consider talking to the chief of staff about your desire for a meeting, or plan to meet with the staff person who works on preservation issues. (More often than not your meeting will end up being with staff not the member).

\* Prepare and send beforehand a memorandum or agenda that outlines what you plan to discuss at the meeting and who will be attending. Staff will appreciate the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the issues and brief their boss. Include bill numbers when referencing particular legislation.

\* Gather any background material that may be useful, including some memento of a preservation project—a poster, artifact, or the like.

\* Reconfirm a week or so before the meeting.

\* If several people will be attending the meeting, coordinate your remarks in advance, including deciding who will take the lead and how.

During

\* Bring copies of your memorandum/agenda and a list of meeting participants, including contact information for each, to hand out at the start of the meeting. Present any memento you have brought. Note: Make sure that the cost of this memento is beneath the maximum allowable amount.

\* Acknowledge the member’s support for preservation.

\* Get to the point of the meeting quickly, be succinct, and keep the meeting as brief as possible.

\* Discuss the bill by using its number and title. If you are not lobbying on a particular bill, be specific about what you want the member to do for you.

\* Use specific examples from your member’s state or district to support your point.

\* Bring materials to illustrate your point. It is always a good idea to leave some concrete reminder of your visit for the staff or member to refer to later. A one-page briefing sheet is particularly effective. As preservationists we are lucky to have some great images of our work—before and after photos can be powerful tools.

\* Be prepared to answer questions on preservation, not the legislative process. Remember, you are the preservation expert; you know more about preservation than they do.

\* Feel free to ask questions about where they are in the legislative process.

\* Always look for opportunities to be of service to the member. For example, offer to send follow-up information regarding issues that came up during the meeting.

\* Suggest a follow-up, i.e., a meeting in the district or with the district staff, or offer to keep the member regularly updated on what you have discussed. Ask the member who your point of contact should be on the matter.

After

\* Send a thank-you note to both the member and the staff along with any additional materials you have offered to provide. Use the note to briefly restate and reinforce your arguments.

\* Publicize the visit. Include a story in your organization’s newsletter. Send photos and press releases to the local newspaper. Let other preservation organizations involved in the same issues know about the meeting and what was discussed.

\* Stay connected with your member and staff person, and work to cultivate the member as a preservation champion. Think of creative ways to involve your member in preservation-related activities, such as the special events suggested below.

Lobbying in Person in the District Office

Asking for a meeting with the member in his or her district office, or inviting the member to visit a preservation venue, can be a very effective way to get his or her attention. Although always busy, most members can pay better attention when they’re “back home” and not juggling the many conflicting demands of their Washington schedules.

Often, scheduled Washington meetings with members are actually delegated to staff when the member is called away to a floor or committee vote, or for some other urgent legislative action; this kind of scheduling difficulty is not as often a problem in the home district.

In cases when the issue you want to discuss has a large local impact, it may make sense to meet with the member’s district staff. As a general rule, policy research and advice is provided by the Washington staff, but when there is a large local dimension to an issue, the district office director or other key staff may be able to weigh in with a local perspective.

If you meet with staff in the district office, request that your comments be conveyed to the Washington office and also write your representative or senator giving a brief outline of your meeting and the specific recommendations made to the district staff.

Lobbying by Letter and E-Mail

They typical method for contacting a representative usually begins with an email. When composing the message write something very specific in the subject line. A staffer will be more tempted to delete or forward an e-mail before opening it if he or she doesn’t know what it is about. In the e-mail message, be sure to include all your contact information such as street address, telephone number, and title and organization if appropriate.

The content of the e-mail is similar to a letter. Since members of Congress receive thousands of communications each year, the most eloquent and persuasive lobbying email may not get the attention it deserves if it is too long or illegible.

A representative or senator can gauge constituent sentiment by analyzing the mail received on the subject. Both the quantity and the quality of letters are important.

Since members of Congress receive thousands of letters each year, the most eloquent and persuasive lobbying letter may not get the attention it deserves if it is too long or illegible. The following suggestions will maximize your letter’s effect.

\* Discuss only one issue per letter.

\* Keep letters to one page.

\* Mention the bill number, its title, and the area of your concern in the first paragraph.

\* Relate the legislation to a local issue or law, and use local examples to show the effect on the district.

\* Ask a specific question about the bill or issue. This will increase the chances of receiving an individual response, not a form letter.

\* Always request a specific action, for example, “Please vote ‘Yes’ on H.R. 1111.”

\* Do not put a “cc” reference at the bottom of the letter to your representative or senator. This would suggest that other recipients are almost as important, and lessen the letter’s impact.

It is advisable to first submit your letter by email and then mail it as a follow up. This speeds your message on its way, which can be important when time is a factor. Also, staffers often prefer email to letters, which take more time to open and handle.

Lobbying by Phone

While letters or personal visits are the most effective methods of lobbying, telephone calls can also get results. Telephone calls can be especially important for time sensitive lobbying efforts. You can also make a follow-up call to check if your letter or e-mail has been received and registered. The same rules that apply to letter writing will also work for phone lobbying.

Remember:

\* Be concise.

\* Identify yourself as a constituent.

\* State the reason for your call by bill number and/or subject.

\* Ask a specific question or request a specific action.

\* Relate the bill to a local example or problem State your position as “for” or “against” the bill.

\* Ask where your member of congress stands on the issue.

\* Follow up the phone call with a letter.

Representative’s and senator’s offices in Washington can be reached by calling the U.S. Capitol switchboard. Dial(202) 224-3121 and ask the operator for your congressman’s office.

Lobbying Coalitions or at the State and Local Levels

Lobbying Coalitions: Organizations often join together in lobbying alliances to achieve common goals on a specific issue. Local and statewide preservation and conservation organizations make good lobbying partners. A jointly written or co-signed lobbying letter from a group of organizations is especially effective as it indicates unity on an issue.

Lobbying—State and Local Levels: Although federal laws have a tremendous impact on preservation, the success or failure of preservation may be determined at the local level. Lobbying state and local elected officials is just as important as lobbying at the national level. Fortunately, all of the same rules apply; “lobbying is lobbying” regardless of the office the elected official holds.

State lobbying networks should be used to lobby for state legislation too. Many important preservation issues must be decided by the state legislature, such as state enabling laws and residential or commercial tax policy.

https://www.specialneedsalliance.org/the-voice/political-advocacy-by-parents-of-children-with-disabilities/

Keith: How shall we cite the original document?

Thanks to Keith J. Nelson, Ph.D. for sharing the original document on which this is based.