

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY FOR YOUR TOWN

As we think ahead to the 2004 legislative session, we consider again what are the most effective ways to contact our legislators and to get our points across to the people who call the shots under the gold dome in our Capitol. Legislators are most interested in the opinions of their constituents back home. Therefore, you, the elected and appointed officials working in the towns that your legislators are elected to represent, are the most effective advocates for your communities.

Whether at home or when visiting the State House, here are some tips to help you get the best results from your legislators or members of a legislative committee before whom you are testifying.

On an individual level:

Get personally acquainted with your senators and representatives.

Every legislator, in fact every person, has his or her story. If you take the time to find out, you may find your opinion of your legislator changes and your understanding of his or her motives will only increase. Contacting your legislators only when you want their support on a legislative matter might be too little too late. It is better to be in touch throughout your legislators' terms of office.

Recognize your legislators' problems. Your legislators, once elected, represent all the constituents in your area – liberal, conservative, business, labor, conservation and municipal. Your legislators may have facts about a situation or piece of legislation that are not available to you. Try to take the time to understand their outlooks and objectives. Most controversial legislation is the result of compromise, and there may be times when legislation does not go your way. Try to refrain from being critical at the same time you assure municipal interests are not compromised into oblivion. Even if you lose today, you will need that legislator or he or she will need you tomorrow. We can all disagree without being disagreeable.

Stay well informed and take the time to inform your legislator and your advocacy organization, VLCT. The VLCT *Weekly Legislative Report* is the primary means through which the League communicates legislative information to its members. Every Thursday evening during the legislative session, VLCT legislative staff summarizes action of the week on bills that affect local governments. The newsletter is posted on the VLCT Web site (www.vlct.org), e-mailed and snail-mailed to members Friday afternoons. Occasionally VLCT legislative staff will also e-mail and post on our Web site *Legislative Action Alerts* to members, asking for you to contact your legislators on a particular issue that is going to be voted on in the following day or two and on which legislators need to have a municipal perspective. Because of the time factor involved, *Action Alerts* are not mailed to members. When you have contacted your legislator about a particular bill or requesting a particular vote, please remember to inform your legislative staff in Montpelier! We would far prefer to not blunder into some situation where we are saying something contrary to what you might have told your legislator. That only gives the legislator the freedom to do whatever he or she wants to do.

With the above actions, you have laid the groundwork for effective advocacy. Now, when you actually go to the State House, how can you and your colleagues be most effective?

When trying to convince a board, commission or legislators to revise their thinking about an issue or to start thinking about an issue, remember this at all times: *You are the messenger. Your comments need to be directed to the issue and to supporting the views of the people for whom you are speaking. Your own personal feelings and beliefs are not the subject of discussion and may diminish the power of your arguments. Your credibility is everything in this game, and once lost it is very difficult to re-establish.*

An effective advocate's strengths:

• **Information.** This is a municipal official's long suit. You have made sure that you are well informed. Now the position you are supporting must be supported by the facts, and you are the one who can best provide them. Even more important, you must build credibility by proving to be an irrefutable source of impartial information.

• **Preparation.** Research the topic and the people before testifying. What is the topic? Which committee is hearing testimony? What will the opponents (if any) say and how can they be best contradicted? What are the possible alternatives to my proposed solution and why is mine better? Who are the important players and what are their biases? Where can I best compromise if need be? Try to ask only those questions to which you know the answers. Being blind-sided is difficult!

• **Consistency.** Make sure you say the same thing before all the different committees and to all legislators with whom you visit. If you have new issues, ideas or changes in your position, be sure to back track and alert all the previous players of the new situation and why it changed.

- **Honesty.** Tell them the truth, the *whole* truth and *nothing but* the truth. *Don't* tell them anything you wouldn't want to see attributed to you on the front page of the newspaper the next morning.
- **No personal opinions.** To be an effective spokesperson, you cannot offer publicly, or even privately, any personal opinion that differs from the marching orders from your board or constituents. Doing this even once destroys your ability to ever again represent them. Be careful about making jokes. So far, it appears that the weather and high school sports may be the only safe topics for personal opinions.
- **Don't overreach.** Testify on issues on which you are the expert or have been asked to comment on. Saying, "I don't know. I will get back to you." is OK. Offer to have the person who knows the answer contact the legislator, so that you are still being helpful. Stay away from topics that are not the subject of discussion.
- **Stay out of the water if you can't swim.** The "how a bill becomes a law" flow chart is only the calm and quiet surface of a very turbulent ocean with tides, current and rip tides beneath and out of sight. Bills in the Legislature become hostages, victims of personal retribution and weapons of partisan warfare. There is no way you can know all the reasons why legislators act the way they do, and you'll never be good enough to figure out the whole system. Stay on the top of the water and deal with the merits of the bill or proposal.
- **Formality.** During testimony, address legislators as "Rep. Smith" or "Sen. Jones." Address board or commission chairs as Mr. or Ms. Clearly state your name and affiliation every time you speak, and address your comments to the chair. Remember that the chairperson is the one who runs the meeting and will have the most to say about how a bill or proposal is handled. Be polite!
- **Handouts.** Keep any handouts informational and concise. Many legislators feel they don't have the time to read beyond the first page.
- **Be available and accessible.** Personal presence in the State House can't be beat, but make sure that the legislators have your phone number and e-mail address.
- **"You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em."** Knowing when to compromise instead of insisting on something you know is right and when to break all of the above rules are the two questions for which we have no answers. Let us know when you find out!

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Legislative and Membership Services

(Editor's Note: For a more detailed discussion of the legislative process – how a bill becomes a law - please see the preview edition of the VLCT Weekly Legislative Report, mailed to VLCT members in mid-December.)

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