

## **Talking With Elected Officials – Any Level**

### **Guide to Effective Participation**

You can actively participate in the legislative process at any level in a variety of ways. Select the method that allows the fullest expression of your personal interest and commitment, but follow some basic steps.

### **Network with Your Peers**

Participate in the Heritage Caucus; get involved with your WMA Board and/or Legislative Committee, your regional associations and your peer organizations.

### **Know How the Process Works**

To be most effective, a basic understanding of the legislative process is essential. If there is something you do not understand, ask someone who can provide an answer or direct you to adequate resources.

### **Resources**

- Request information by mail or find it online.
- Look for a city or county website and review the online listings and resources; print the contact lists
- Attend council/commission meetings and observe the proceedings; note the standard etiquette for speaking
- Call your councilmember, commissioner or legislator's office and ask for assistance or procedural information
- Call the Legislative Information Center: 360/786-7573
- Go to [www.Access.Wa.gov](http://www.Access.Wa.gov) and browse through the Legislature and Secretary of State's resources online; read the How a Bill Becomes a Law page (the process is somewhat similar at all levels, but usually with fewer steps in smaller jurisdictions)
- Check your local library for publications and handouts
- Look for League of Women Voter's publications on listing elected officials, procedures and other resources

### **Get to Know Your Legislators**

To make a difference in the legislative process at any level, you must develop a relationship with your legislators. The best way is to spend time with them: attend council/commission sessions, go to invitational coffees and public functions then arrange a meeting to discuss concerns. You are unlikely to agree on every issue but you can still work effectively by being respectful and striving to build a positive relationship.

### **Get to Know Legislative Staff**

Legislators rely heavily on professional staff for information gathering and analysis. You can play an equally supportive role by making sure staff members are aware of the perspective your personal knowledge and experience can provide. Legislators and staff face a vast range of issues which they need to understand. They appreciate new sources of clear and accurate information, especially if provided supportive data.

### **Contact s**

The most effective means is often through personal visits but letters; e-mail messages; or phone calls work. The method may depend on whether you wish to have a conversation or just state an opinion. You may leave messages for State Legislators on any issue on the toll-free State Legislative Hotline at 1.800.562.6000. At the local and county level you will likely leave messages with staff or via voice mail. If you wish a response, state your name (spell and pronounce if it's unusual), the best time and number to reach you and a succinct statement of your concerns.

### **Make Yourself the Expert**

Before you address an issue, do some homework. Gain an understanding of the whole issue, pros and cons; who it affects, what others feel about it, how it will influence future trends, and any other information you are able to gather. Thorough research allows you to present your viewpoint with confidence and credibility. This, with your personal experience, is the most effective information you can provide.

### **Hearings and Public Meetings**

Hearings are conducted based on local, county and state policy, rules, and regulations which may differ from place to place. Ask about the process to be clear. Time is usually limited, so be brief and direct. Provide a written copy of your remarks but try not to read them; speaking with sincerity, clarity, and knowledge of your subject can be far more convincing.

### **Key Points to Remember**

To be more effective when you contact elected officials or comment at public meetings, follow these points:

- Be well prepared for your discussions.
- Provide a written statement with all oral presentations.
- Offer examples, facts, and success stories if possible.
- Make letters and e-mail formal, specific, and concise.
- If others will be offering similar remarks, try to coordinate your testimony and avoid duplication.
- Don't berate or argue with your legislator when you disagree. Simply thank the member for the time spent with you and express a desire for further discussion.

### **Your Participation Makes A Difference**

Speaking up for our cultural arts and heritage institutions through the legislative process is one way each of us may contribute to the quality of life we experience in our communities. The willingness of each individual to be a responsible, involved participant is crucial to the decision-making process and can make a significant, long-term impact throughout the State..

**Credits:** Part of this information is derived from Access Washington, the Official State Government website.