

Lobbying and Testifying



Lobbying and Testifying: Overview

In America, as in other representative democracies, government responds to the wishes of the people it represents. For SNCC, making our wishes heard is vital as we are often overshadowed by interest in the larger region. We must have a clear, concise message that we communicate to our elected officials. This takes active participation in the process. These activities are called lobbying.

Anyone who can write a letter or make a phone call can lobby for positive change. Simply put, lobbying is trying to persuade someone to our point of view, whether it be a town mayor, county council member, or a State legislator. We can also lobby the general public for support for our cause.

Always remember that each of us is a constituent, which means that we carry weight. But remember, legislation reflects the will of the people only IF we and enough others take the trouble to let our elected officials know what we want. Democracy is not a spectator sport.

Lobbying includes activities such as:

- Writing Letters
- Calling an elected official's office
- Meeting face to face with elected officials
- Organizing other to write/call/meet with officials
- Inviting a legislator to attend meetings on key issues
- Writing a letter to the editor

It is important to know that not all policy work or communication with legislators is lobbying. For example, if you are attempting to *educate* a legislator or the public about an issue, but not intending to influence them, it is not considered lobbying.

The theory behind community advocacy is simple: When legislators hear from their constituencies, they are more likely to respond to those constituents' needs. While the political process is full of special interests and professional lobbyist, community activist should know from experience that one voice can make a difference, and many voices make a movement.

The SNCCA, its members, and the constituents it represents must speak loudly and frequently on our priority community issues to ensure the future we desire for our area.

Who are constituents?

Constituents are the people who elected officials were elected to represent and who ultimately have a role in determining whether or not they are re-elected.



Tips for Successful Lobbying Meetings with Elected Officials

- Bring a one-page fact sheet that covers the main points about the issue. Give it to the legislator during the discussion.
- Unless the legislator sits on committees directly related to our issue, he/she will need information about the specifics of the problem and the bill.
- Avoid hostility at all costs. Even if you disagree with the legislator's opinions, avoid arguing. Just state your convictions and ask for support.
- Be a good listener as well as a good talker.
- Do not underestimate the influence of the staff of elected officials. Don't pass on the opportunity to meet with staff if the legislator is unavailable.
- If the legislator keeps changing the subject, tactfully but firmly bring the conversation back on topic.
- Elected officials are generalists and usually will not know as much about our issue as we do. Speak with confidence and authority on the issue remembering that you are their source of information at that moment.
- Don't just drop by their office. Elected officials are very busy, so always schedule an appointment.

Writing to an Elected Official

Letter writing is a very effective and persuasive (not to mention easy) way to effectively lobby elected officials. Anyone can send a letter to his or her representatives. Elected officials take the pulse of their district through the letters they receive from constituents. As a constituent yourself, you automatically have something that even the most well-paid and high-powered lobbyists must fight for – the ear of your elected official. Below are some guidelines to help you use your influence most effectively.

- Write to represent the SNCCA only if authorized by the board members. In most cases, you should write to represent your own interests, which will usually be the same as the SNCCA position on issues.
- Write to express your opinion about an issue they are considering or should be considering, to thank them for a vote or action with which you agree, or to express your disapproval for an action you don't agree with.



A Good Letter

1. Keep it short - less than one page - and limit the letter to one page.
2. The first paragraph should state that you are a constituent and what it is you are writing about. Ask the elected official to do something specific, such as introduce an ordinance or vote against an ordinance.
3. In the middle portion of the letter, explain your reason for writing, calling attention to the issues impact on you and the communities of SNCC.
4. Finally, restate your position and the action you want the elected official to take. Ask for a reply.

The Great Letter

1. Cite your own experience and observations if possible. Personal stories demonstrate the depth and sincerity of your concern.
2. Be helpful, rather than threatening or inflammatory, even when the legislator's viewpoints differ from yours.
3. Demonstrate your familiarity with the issue or the piece of legislation. This will indicate that constituents are serious about the community issue.
4. Mention your community affiliation (e.g. SNCCA, Civic Association, parent, etc.) to avoid being pigeon-holed as an extremist or as a NIMBY (not in my backyard).
5. Write on personal or business stationery and include a return address.
6. Address the elected official properly. For example, "The Honorable Christopher Coons, New Castle County President".
7. Mail your letter first class, if time permits. However, if a decision is coming up and time is critical, you should fax or e-mail the letter instead.

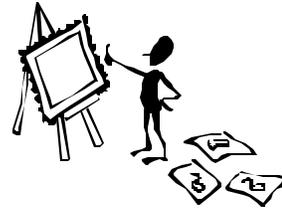
E-mail

E-mail can be a very quick and inexpensive way of communicating with legislators; however, it is usually not considered as effective as a personal letters. Nearly all elected officials have email addresses that are available to the public for use by constituents. E-mail messages are generally shorter than letters, so the message needs to be concise and, as always, polite.



Testifying at a Public Hearing

Public testimony opportunities are extremely important for your issue. Sometimes they may take the form of informal opinion gathering at a public workshop, but more often you will be testifying at a more formal public hearing held by a decision-making body. Written testimony is usually accepted at public hearings, but it is far more powerful to attend the hearing and deliver spoken testimony.



Why Public Hearings are Important

1. Testimony becomes part of the official record and will likely be used later in making a final decision.
2. Public hearings can provide new factual information, which can convince the decision-makers to re-think an earlier decision.
3. The media often attend hearings on controversial issues, so the hearing is another way to get your message out to a broader audience.
4. Public testimony sends a strong political signal to the legislative body or agency, as well as to the press, about public opinion on the issue.
5. Hearings are important from a legal standpoint. If you suspect that you may appeal the decision later, your legal standing is based on having made your legal arguments during the public comment period.

Guidelines for Effective Public Testimony

Before the hearing, spend as much time as possible preparing for your testimony:

- Verify time, date, and place of hearing in advance.
- Find out where in the meeting agenda the public testimony will be permitted.
- Find out time allowed for testimony (5 min.). Tailor your testimony to time allowed.
- Get on speaker's list.
- Prepare your testimony.
- Research the issue to provide support for your opinions with FACTS
- Use visual aids (photos, maps, etc.)
- If a land based issue, visit site and be familiar with it so you can speak more personally & confidently.



At the hearing, do the following:

- Sign in, even if you do not plan to speak.
- Try to get on list first, the earlier you speak-the stronger your impact.
- Begin by given name, address & whom you represent. Only one person should give “official” testimony for SNCCA, all other should speak as “residents or citizens”.
- Address the decision making body correctly -- e.g. Councilman X.
- Make eye contact and speak slowly.
- State position & why, provide personal story if possible.
- Be prepared to answer questions and don't be afraid to say “I don't know, but I will try to get the answer for you”.
- Thank the body before you leave podium.
- Listen and record statements made by opponents. Make notes of factual errors or new ideas.
- Show tact. Don't applaud or be a boo-bird (its not Vet. Stadium)

Tips for Public Speaking

- Write speech ahead of time and use summary notes.
- Practice, Practice, Practice.
- Make eye contact with Audience.
- Speak slowly.
- Uses pauses at key issues to emphasize them.
- If appropriate, tell a “issue related” joke.
- Speak clearly. Drink plenty of water, no milk beforehand.
- Breathe and relax while waiting your turn.
- Remove “I” from your speeches. Use “we”.
- Appearance matters. Comfortable but appropriate.
- Use gestures & movement to reinforce ideas.
- Use vocal variations - natural inflections.
- Be yourself & allow your personality to come through.
- Smile and have fun.



Telephoning Your Legislator

Some messages are better suited to certain methods of communication. If we wish to simply request that our legislator vote “yes” or “no” on a particular ordinance or legislation, then we can pick up the phone and call their office. Also opt for a phone call if the legislator will be voting soon. The SNCCA can use the telephone as a grassroots lobbying tool by organizing “call-in day” and spreading the word to our members and communities, encouraging them to participate. However, it is far better to use a personal letter or face-to-face meeting to deliver complicated messages and do relationship building with legislators.

Telephone Tips

- Before calling, write out the name of the ordinance or the issue you are calling about, what action the elected official should take, and two or three short reasons why they should take this action.
- When the call is answered, identify yourself by name and the voting district you are from (or your community name or address).
- Explain why you are calling. Be as specific about the issue as possible.
- Do not simply say, “I am calling to urge that you vote “No.” Instead, tell the staff person why the legislator should vote “no.” Provide supporting information by focusing on two or three of the talking points you wrote down.
- Ask that our message be conveyed to the legislator and that you receive a written response.
- Remember to politely thank the person taking the call for his/her time.
- Keep your call short and to the point.

