



Making it Count at the Capitol: Tips to Effectively Communicate with your Legislators

While the ACCG staff will be at the Capitol every day, remember the cardinal rule of legislative advocacy from counties' standpoint: county commissioners, as elected officials, are the most effective voice for county government.

In virtually all cases, phone calls, visits, e-mails or text messages from you to your legislators carry tremendous weight and can influence legislative decisions.

How Can You Help?

Develop a rapport with members of your delegation.

Remind your legislators that county officials and ACCG are among the very few sources of information where a legislator can learn about the impact of legislation on an entire community. Mostly, they will be hearing from lobbying organizations and individuals who have a very narrow, self-interest constituency.

Regular phone, e-mail or text contact during the session is important.

Make sure that legislators know how certain bills would affect your (and their) constituents. Note that the legislative process is incredibly fast-paced. Timeliness is critical during the session, so contact by phone, e-mail or text is usually better than writing a letter.

Plan on visiting the Capitol several times during the session

Make appointments with members of your legislative delegation. Visit with them in their offices and attend meetings of the committees on which they serve.

Know how to reach your legislators.

Be sure to have your legislators' telephone, cell phone, address and e-mail address. Double-check this information each January, since offices are periodically reassigned.

Know the best time to reach your legislators.

Ask them when they are usually in their Capitol offices. As a rule, early mornings and late afternoons are best, but this depends on committee meetings. Keep in mind that schedules are less predictable in the final weeks of the session.



Be specific and concise.

When discussing legislation, always provide a bill number and the author if possible as legislators have to consider hundreds of bills. Be sure you understand a bill before contacting your legislator about it. ACCG's legislative updates and data base should provide ample information and feel free to contact ACCG staff with any questions you may have. Also, since legislators are often inundated with letters and calls, your message should be brief and to the point. Try to keep letters, e-mails or memos to no more than one page.

Offer background and support on issues you share in common.

If your legislator is carrying a bill you support, provide him or her with local anecdotes and situations that have prompted introduction of the bill, as well as fiscal impact it will have in your area. Factual information and local impact will help your legislator argue more effectively in committee and on the floor.

Offer to testify on a bill of interest to the county.

Testimony from commissioners can be very effective during legislative committee hearings. Legislators appreciate other elected officials testifying in support of their bills. Even if you cannot come to the Capitol, your phone call can be helpful, especially if you have already developed a relationship with them.

Give legislators an early "heads up" call if one of their bills is going to cause problems for your county.

They will appreciate your early warning of problems with a bill as it moves through the process. This also provides an opportunity to collaborate with them early on in order to work out the negative impacts. They would much rather hear from you personally rather than reading it in the local press.

Maintain direct contact while your legislators are at home.

Most legislators will be in their home districts during weekends and when session is out. Make a point to visit them, arrange periodic Saturday breakfast meetings with delegation members, or arrange joint meetings with other counties in your legislator's district during the session, as well as during the remainder of the year.



Public Relations with Legislators: Dos and Don'ts

Do be direct in giving your opinions

Most legislators want to know what you think about an issue and, even if they do not, you should provide input. Provide facts to the extent possible regarding the impact of legislation on the citizens and taxpayers in your county.

Do offer to help legislators with constituent issues.

Legislators are asked to address a wide variety of issues during the year. Often, you may have the knowledge and background to help a legislator handle constituent issues. Many of the constituency groups that contact you also contact legislators. Your day-to-day local perspective can prove valuable to both legislators and constituents. Remember, you and your legislator are a team, representing the same constituency.

Do thank your legislators for the good things they do.

Complaints that are not balanced by appreciation can wear thin over time. Take time to send a letter or make a call to say "thank you" when your legislator(s) supports positive legislation.

Do use the "golden rule" as your guide.

Bottom line: treat your legislators as you would like to be treated when it comes to issues of public importance.

Don't publicly attack legislators when they take a different position than yours.

Publicly attacking legislators or questioning their motives is not an effective means of resolving differences and provides fodder for the press, which oftentimes takes great pleasure in highlighting personal disputes. Communicating your views privately whenever possible is much more effective and encourages frank discourse on the issues. Even if issues make the local press, remember that your differences are on policy. They are not personal.

Don't burn your bridges.

It is natural to be disappointed if your legislator does not vote the way you ask him or her to. However, it is important that one or two votes do not destroy your relationship you will need their support on many other issues in the future.