

Tips for the Citizen Lobbyist

Maine's citizen legislature is made up mostly of people who truly want to do what will be best for the state. Some legislators are certainly motivated by partisan ideology, others by personal philosophy, some by the needs of their district and most by a combination of factors. All legislators are forced to make hard decisions about a wide spectrum of issues, and none are experts on all the issues that they must address, especially now that term limits restrict legislative service. Your legislators can only represent you well if they understand your interests and the effect their decisions will have on your community.

Professional lobbyists are often the primary source of information that state legislators have on important issues. This "Tips" section intends to level the playing field and help you communicate effectively with your lawmakers.

A face-to-face conversation with your legislator (either at home in your district or at the Capitol in Augusta) is usually the best way to influence his or her position. Other direct contact – such as a phone call or letter – is also effective, but less so than a personal visit. E-mail can be an important lobbying tool, but is generally less effective than more personal means of contact. Testifying at legislative hearings and letters to the editor can also make a difference. A combination of contacts including a face-to-face meeting is usually the best strategy.

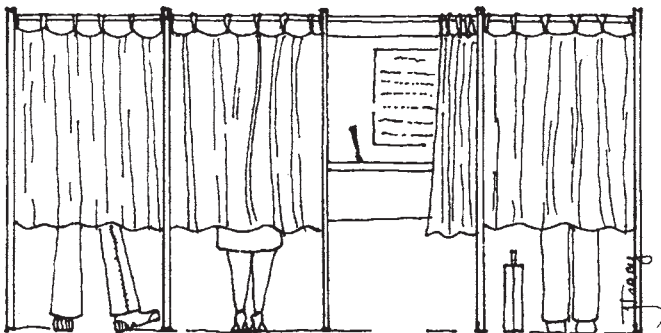
Yours is the most important voice in the legislative process, but only if you make it heard.

Visiting Your Legislator

The most effective means of communicating with your legislators is through a face-to-face conversation. Maine legislators are generally very willing to meet or speak with constituents. At the Capitol, legislators hear constantly from paid lobbyists. It's rare for them to speak to a constituent who has traveled to Augusta to discuss an important issue with them except at a public hearing. Even at home in your legislator's district, a face-to-face meeting will make a significant and memorable impact. It's the best way to convince your legislator to support your position. One in-person meeting may be worth a dozen letters. Here are some basic rules to follow when meeting your legislator in person. They also apply to most other contacts.

Plan Your Visit - Be clear about what it is you want to achieve. Make sure the Legislature will be in Augusta the day you plan to visit. Find out when there will be general House and Senate sessions or committee meetings that day.

Make an Appointment – If you want to meet your legislator in your community, call them directly to set up a meeting. Explain why you want to meet with the legislator and who you represent. If you're traveling to Augusta to speak to your legislator, you don't need an appointment (though you won't generally get as much time to speak to them as you will at home).



Be Prompt and Patient - It is common that your legislator may be running late or that your meeting may be interrupted, especially at the Capitol. If interruptions do occur, be flexible.

Be Prepared - Know the bill numbers of legislation you wish to discuss. Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. Have copies available to leave with the legislator after you have discussed a certain issue. But don't overdo it with materials; too much paper won't get read.

Be Brief - Time is a precious commodity during the session. Don't expect more than 5 or 10 minutes with your legislator at the Capitol in Augusta. If you arrange a meeting in your district, 30 to 45 minutes is appropriate.

Be Political - Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the legislator's district. If possible, describe for the legislator how you or your group can be of assistance to him or her. Remember to ask for a commitment (to support a particular bill, provide a certain kind of assistance, etc.).

Be Responsive - Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the legislator expresses interest or asks questions. If you do not know the answer, tell her/him you will get the information they've requested.

Be Respectful - If a legislator doesn't agree with you, be respectful of their position. Rudeness won't help your cause. But it's fine to assertively argue your position, or express that you're disappointed in theirs.

Be Thankful - Be sure to thank your legislator for his or her time and attention.

Follow Up – Write a letter thanking your legislator for the meeting, providing any information requested, and checking in about any unfinished business (for example, if your legislator said s/he needed time to think about the issue before adopting a position).

Tips for the Citizen Lobbyist

Writing to Elected Officials

Writing letters is one of the most effective methods of communicating with elected officials. Writing a letter allows you to carefully form your words and arguments without the pressure of a face-to-face meeting. It also allows the elected official to read and consider your points away from the distractions of the state house or a formal meeting, and shows that you feel strongly enough about an issue to actually sit down and compose your thoughts. Letters also allow you to provide your representative with other written material that supports your point of view. Handwritten, legible letters are most effective.

Here are some tips for writing effective letters to your elected officials.

Writing Your Legislator

Identify Yourself: Let your legislator know immediately that you are a concerned constituent, whether you are writing in a personal or professional capacity, and whether you are also speaking for others. Include your name, address, phone number and e-mail address in the event they want to reach you.

Be Specific: Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, e.g., LD ____, House Bill ____ or Senate Bill ____.

Be Focused: Address only one issue in each letter; and if possible, keep the letter to one page. Include key information, using facts and examples to support your position. Don't undermine your credibility by making arguments that can't be substantiated.

Be Personal: Explain how the legislation you're writing about will affect you, your family, your business, or community. Sending hand written or typed letters is generally more effective than sending e-mail.

Be Clear: if you want the lawmaker to support a specific bill, say so. If you want a "no" vote from your lawmaker, say so. If you want a response, request one.

Writing Letters to the Editor

Elected officials tend to be very sensitive to public opinion, and the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper provides an excellent forum for publicizing a representative's position or actions in support or opposition of an important issue. It also allows you to directly encourage other members of your community to take action on an issue. Many of the tips listed previously apply equally to letters to the editor but there are other points to keep in mind:

Address Your Letter Properly

Be sure to include your name, address, daytime phone number, and e-mail address. Many papers will not publish a letter unless they can confirm that it was actually written by the person whose name is attached.

Submit Your Letter in Electronic Form

If at all possible, submit your letter in electronic form. The best way is to insert it into the body of the e-mail message. This avoids problems with editors who do not want to open attachments. Some papers will only print letters in electronic form; in other instances publication of your letter will be greatly delayed if it is not electronic.

Reference a Previous Article

If your letter responds to a specific article or statement reported in an article, reference the title and date of the article in your first sentence.

Make Your Point Immediately

Your most important point or message should be expressed in your first paragraph. If you are writing as part of an organized campaign, be sure the campaign is contained early in the letter.

Stick to the Word Limit and Be Brief

Your letter should be between 100 and 300 words long. The shorter it is, the greater the chance it will be printed. Your paper may have a specific word limit. Check the paper or call them for their guidelines.

Time Your Letter Appropriately

If you are responding to a previously published article or editorial, try to submit your letter within a week of the story's appearance. If you are writing in reference to a specific legislative action, try to time your letter so it can be printed within a few days of an expected vote.

Avoid Threats or Personal Attacks

Using threats or personal attacks are not effective ways to generate understanding and support. Such tactics often distract from a more important message.

Follow Up With the Editor

After submitting your letter, contact the editorial page editor to make sure they received the letter, and to ask directly if and when they plan to print it.

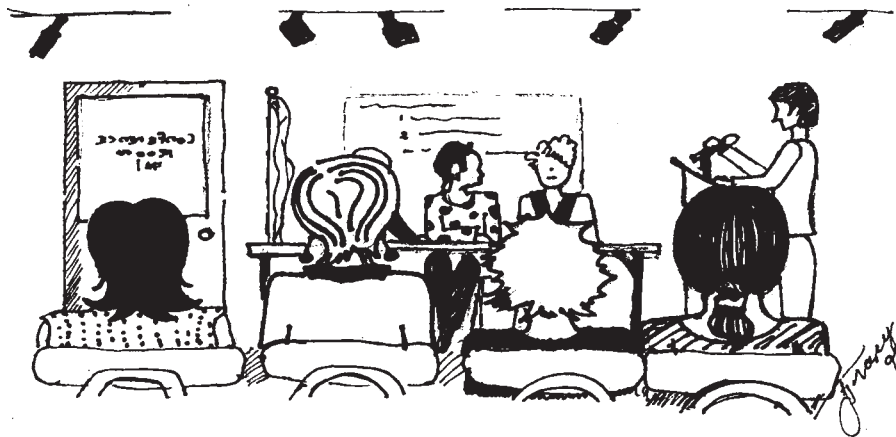
See next page for a listing of Maine's daily newspapers.

Tips for the Citizen Lobbyist

Testifying at Public Hearings

Public hearings are held on most legislative issues, and provide a number of opportunities for citizen activists to affect public policy. By encouraging other people who share your views on the issue in question to attend and testify, you can demonstrate broad support for your position. Since the media often cover public hearings, you can display that same support in newspapers and on television. Statements and written material submitted during a public hearing become part of the public record which must be considered by the decision making body. Hearings also allow you to hear and study the arguments of those who disagree with you on a specific topic.

Public hearings can be intense and sometimes intimidating, but they are a vital part of the legislative process and should not be ignored. The legislators who convene public hearings are concerned citizens like you. They need the information you can provide. Following are tips to help you make your participation in hearings as effective as possible.



Use Your Time Efficiently

There is often a time limit for speakers at public hearings – especially hearings on high profile issues. Be concise and direct. Talk with others who share your view and divide the topics that need to be addressed among several speakers so all of your issues are discussed.

Submit Supporting Materials

You will be allowed to submit written material that can include additional personal comments, charts, maps or materials prepared by other experts on the topic. You can also make these materials, as well as news releases, available to members of the media who may be covering the hearing.

Take Notes

During the hearings, try to take notes on the testimony submitted by others to track points that need clarification or reiteration, and arguments that need rebuttal. You can address these issues during your oral statement, or through additional written comments submitted after the hearing.

Be Polite

Public hearings can be very emotionally charged. You may hear accusations or assertions which you vehemently oppose, but it is important to keep your emotions under control and your statement focused on points that will advance your position. Venting your anger or frustration will only cut into the time you have to make your case and distract from more important arguments.

Maine's Daily Newspapers

Bangor Daily News
491 Main Street
P.O. Box 1329
Bangor, ME 04402-1329
Toll-free phone: 1-800-432-7964
Local phone: 990-8000
Fax: 941-9476
e-mail: bdnmail@bangordailynews.net
website: www.bangornews.com

Journal Tribune
457 Alfred Street
P.O. Box 627
Biddeford, ME 04005
Toll-free phone: 1-888-429-1535
Local phone: 282-1535
Fax: 282-3138
e-mail: jtribune@gwi.net
website: www.journaltribune.com

Kennebec Journal
274 Western Avenue
Augusta, ME 04330
Toll-free phone: 1-800-537-5508
Fax: 623-2220
e-mail: kjedit@centralmaine.com
website: www.kjonline.com

Sun Journal
14 Park Street
P.O. Box 4400
Lewiston, ME 04243-4400
Toll-free phone: 1-800-482-0753
Local phone: 784-5411
Fax: 777-3436
e-mail: letters@sunjournal.com
website: www.sunjournal.com

Morning Sentinel
31 Front Street
Waterville, ME 04901
Toll-free phone: 1-800-452-4666
Local phone: 873-3341
Fax: 861-9191
e-mail: msedit@centralmaine.com
website: www.onlinesentinel.com

Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram
390 Congress Street
P.O. Box 1460
Portland, ME 04101-5009
Toll-free phone: 1-800-442-6036
Local phone: 791-6650
e-mail: letters@pressherald.com
website: www.maine.today.com

The Times Record
P.O. Box 10
Brunswick ME 04011-1302
Toll-free phone: 1-800-734-6397
Local phone: 729-3311
Fax: 721-3151
e-mail: news@timesrecord.com
website: www.timesrecord.com