
TAKING PART IN THE LEAGUE'S LOBBYING EFFORT

12 Golden Rules For Grass Roots Involvement

by League Staff

Whenever the Missouri Legislature is in session, the Missouri Municipal League staff must: (1) advocate the cities' interests directly with senators, representatives and other state officials; and (2) keep municipal officials informed of and involved in city-related developments at the Capitol.

Naturally, the League staff cannot carry out all legislative activities alone, as personal and continuous contact with 197 senators and representatives is a practical impossibility. More importantly, legislators are most interested in the opinions of their constituents back home. Therefore, the most effective legislative communications come from the mayors, councilmembers and other city officials to whom the legislator is locally accountable.

Teamwork, with emphasis on grassroots lobbying by municipal officials, will once again produce a successful session for Missouri cities. The following suggestions can be useful in assuring that your city's views are heard – and listened to – in the months ahead.

STAY INFORMED

The League's Legislative Reports and Alerts are the primary means through which the League communicates legislative information to its member cities. The Legislative Report highlights important, city-related bills as they move through the legislative process. It also serves as a vehicle for requesting action from your city, such as occasional requests for comments regarding a particular bill's impact on your city; or requests for letters or phone calls of support or opposition.

PUT SOMEONE IN CHARGE

Make sure one staff person is responsible for immediate review of the Legislative Report and any Legislative Alerts, and for initiating a timely response by your city.

This person may be the mayor, the city administrator, an assistant city administrator, an assistant to the city administrator or someone else. During the busiest periods of the legislative session, a response from your city may be needed very quickly, so it is important that someone have the responsibility for coordinating your city's response.

GET PERSONALLY ACQUAINTED

Make it your business to become personally acquainted with your senator and representative. Take an interest in them and get to know their political philosophy.

If you contact your legislators only when you want their support on a legislative matter, it might be too late. It's better to be in touch with them throughout their terms of office.

KNOW YOUR LEGISLATOR'S STAFF

It's also helpful to get to know your legislator's staff. Frequently, you may need to call the legislator to impress upon him or her your city's concerns. If you cannot talk directly to your legislator, a call to the Capitol office staffer, whom you know and who knows you, is the next best thing.

RESPOND TO THE LEAGUE'S REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

The Legislative Report or a Legislative Alert will frequently ask for your assistance in analyzing the effects of a bill or in communicating with legislators. Please respond in a timely manner to League requests for bill reviews and letters, phone calls or emails in support or opposition. Keep track of your positions and responses. Make sure that MML receives a copy of any letter or email that you write in response to a League request.

Remember that the League's position on a specific piece of legislation may change as the bill is amended. Consequently, it is vital that you continue to respond immediately to requests for letters and emails, even though you may have already communicated at an earlier point in the process.

BE ABLE TO ACT QUICKLY

Establish a procedure for urgent (one-day) action on bills.

Occasionally, an important amendment is proposed that requires immediate response by cities. The League will request that you take immediate action, or the League staff may call city officials in cities in key legislative districts and ask them to call their legislators right away. You'll need a quick and simple method to get that call made.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Surprisingly few people ever contact their legislators. This reluctance usually results from the belief that legislators have no time or inclination to answer their phones or read their mail, and that one single contact won't make a difference.

In most cases, these views are mistaken. Thoughtful, factually persuasive contacts can change legislator's minds and cause them to review their judgments.

Although a telephone call, email or a letter can be very effective, personal face-to-face contact is the most effective approach.

Try to talk to your legislators when they are back home in the districts; they are more likely to listen and respond positively in a local environment. Also, when you are in Jefferson City, take the opportunity to drop by and talk to your senator and representative. While members of

the legislature are extremely busy, it should not be assumed they would not have time to see you. After all, they are there to represent your interests and views. Your senator and representative need to be directly exposed to people they represent - including you. They need to know what you think about the issues facing your city and how legislation in Jefferson City will affect you.

Be sure to have accurate facts and good arguments about issues you discuss with legislators and understand the particular bill in question.

COMMUNICATE CAREFULLY AND THOUGHTFULLY

Each letter or email you write should address only one bill and should reference the bill number on a separate line at the top of the page. Otherwise, your information may get lost in the system.

Legislators are often caught in a crossfire between conflicting interests and opinions, and their votes may be contrary to your opinion as a municipal official. Present your position logically and base it on facts. Emotional appeals do not influence a vote.

Don't send just a council resolution. You may want to refer in your letter or email to a resolution, but do not just send the resolution itself.

Identify the bill you are writing about. Give the number of the bill and a brief description of its subject matter. Hundreds of bills are introduced during a regular session, and legislators cannot be expected to immediately recall every one of them merely by a number or a vague description.

Be brief, specific, and to the point. Many issues are complex, but your opinions and arguments have a better chance of being read if they are stated concisely. Remember that your letter will be competing for time and attention with countless others. Most viewpoints can be amply set forth in a carefully written, one-page letter.

Use background material provided by MML as a basis for your own communication, but do not simply copy the language. Give facts and opinions concerning the effects of a particular measure on your own city.

The importance of contacting a legislator on time cannot be overemphasized. A letter does no good if it arrives after a vote.



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KEEP THE LEAGUE STAFF INFORMED

Always send copies of your letters or emails to the League. The staff needs to know to whom you write, when you write and what you say. If you receive a response from a legislator, let us know about that as well. The League's legislative staff reads your letters and incorporates your arguments and local circumstances into League testimony. The staff members also cite your letters when they talk with your legislators.

RECOGNIZE THEIR PROBLEMS

Your legislators represent all the constituents in your area - liberal and conservative, business and labor. Their duty is to represent all the people to the best of their ability.

There may be times when you think your legislators are on the wrong track, but they may have facts that are not available to you. Try to understand their problems, outlook and objectives.

Never threaten political or other consequences if the senator or representative refuses to see an issue your way. Few respond positively to blatant power plays.

Most controversial legislation is the result of compromise - that's the way the system operates. There will be times when legislation does not go your way, so don't be too critical when it happens. You can disagree without being disagreeable. Be very wary of public criticism of your legislator's

actions. Some legislators rarely vote with cities, then come through on crucial votes. Taking them to task in the public forum for a series of votes on relatively unimportant issues can lose their votes permanently on much more vital issues. It's much more effective to sit down with a legislator in private to discuss areas of disagreement.

SAY THANKS

Remember to thank legislators regularly and publicly for their work, support and votes. Never discount the importance of a thank you; it really can make a difference.

This is one of the most important things you can do, because so few people remember to thank their legislators - and legislators clearly remember those who do. Recognition dinners and letters to the editor praising the responsiveness of legislators to local needs can be effective public ways of thanking your legislator.

If you believe your legislators deserve reelection, don't hesitate to get involved when they are campaigning for another term. That's the time they need your help most of all.

DO UNTO OTHERS ...

Approach legislators the way you, as a city official, want to be approached by your constituents - with courtesy and respect. □