

A Citizen's Guide to Effective Legislative Participation



"There is but one element of government, and that is THE PEOPLE. From this springs all government."

— **John Adams**

"It is not the fact of liberty, but the way in which liberty is exercised that ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives."

— **Dorothy Thompson**

The Legislative Process

Every year, the Legislature meets to engage in the process of public decision making. The objective is to reach a consensus on a wide range of issues affecting every citizen and the future prosperity of Washington State. It is a process that involves cooperation to make critical decisions in everyone's best interest.

We have chosen representatives to carry out the difficult task of determining what kind of laws and policies will best serve these interests. However, to effectively perform their job, legislators rely heavily on input from a wide variety of different sources.

They receive a great deal of technical information from their staff, state agency personnel and professional lobbyists. Yet, much of what they actually decide depends on the views, interests and preferences of the citizens who elect them.

This is precisely how the legislative process was designed to work best. It is based on a close, open and positive relationship between elected officials and the citizens whom they represent.

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

Know How the Process Works

For your individual participation to be most effective, a basic understanding of the whole legislative picture is essential. If there is something you do not understand about the process, ask someone who can provide an answer. Here are some resources:

- Call the Legislative Information Center at **(360) 786-7573**.
- Call your legislator's office.
- Explore the Legislative Web Page at www.leg.wa.gov for an overview of the legislative process, and for information on how a bill becomes a law and how to read a bill.
- Listen to or watch broadcasts of committee hearings to see how they work. All committee hearings are broadcast live in streaming audio over our internet web site and many hearings are televised live on TVW (www.tvw.org).

Make Yourself the Expert

Before you address an issue, do some homework. Know the whole issue: 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, and, combined with your personal experience, is the most effective information you can provide.

Get to Know Your Legislators

To make a difference in the legislative process, you must develop a relationship with your legislators. Keep in mind that you can work effectively with someone, regardless of the personal opinions either of you may hold. Although you are unlikely to agree on every issue, you can still build a positive relationship.

The best way to get to know your legislators on a personal basis is to spend time with them when the Legislature is not meeting. Arrange a meeting during the months between sessions when they are home.

Your legislators are also your neighbors. You share many of the same interests and concerns, so make a strong effort to build on the common ground you both hold. Take the time to find out who they are as people.

You can contact your legislators in a number of ways:

- **Personal visit.** Call the office, introduce yourself, tell the legislator or the legislative assistant what you would like to discuss, and make an appointment for a visit.

If you plan a visit, be prepared for your discussion. Know what you want to say, be factual, and

make your comments as brief and specific as you can. If you do not know something, be willing to admit it and offer to follow up with more information later, which is also an avenue for further discussion.

- **Write a letter.** Express your views and request the member's attention through the mail. Make your letters brief, to the point, clear, and formal. Include your mailing address and phone number so the legislator knows where to respond.
- **Send an e-mail message.** Like letters, e-mails should be brief, to the point, clear, and formal. Include your name and mailing address, as well as your e-mail address, and let the legislator know how you'd prefer to be contacted.
- **Call the toll-free Legislative Hotline.** You can call the toll-free Hotline at 1-800-562-6000 to leave a brief message on any issue.
- **Testify before a committee.** Make your views and positions known by testifying before a committee that is having public hearings on an issue or bill.
- **Attend a Town Hall Meeting.** Most Legislators conduct periodic town hall meetings at various locations in their district. This is a good opportunity to meet your Legislator and to express your views and concerns in an informal setting.

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 are aware of the perspective your personal knowledge and experience can provide.

Legislative staff work on a wide range of issues. They always appreciate new sources of clear and accurate information, and they can provide you with the most current information they have.

Network with Other Citizens

Much of the information you need to be effective in the legislative process can be obtained from other concerned and active citizens. Most interest areas are represented by informal citizen groups, if not formal membership organizations.

Find out whether there are groups that share your concerns and establish a network. A group of concerned citizens can be much more effective working together, rather than as separate individuals trying to accomplish the same goal.

Key Points to Remember

Regardless of how frequently you contact your legislators, you will be far more effective if you follow these points:

1. Be well prepared for your discussions.
2. Provide a written statement with all verbal presentations.
3. Make letters and e-mail formal, specific, and concise.
4. 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.

Whatever position you represent, however, remember your participation makes a difference. Our legislative process is one way each of us may contribute to the quality of life we experience in our state. Your willingness to be a responsible, involved participant is crucial to the decision-making process.