



## THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

### **Advocacy Is Not for Experts Only**

Sometimes people and organizations won't lobby because they're afraid they don't know how. They are staunch supporters of their cause, they recognize the importance of lobbying, and they know it pays off. Yet they hold back on the mistaken notion that lobbying is only for experts.

Like anything else, the more you know about how to lobby, the better you will be. But, again, if you can make a phone call or write a letter, you can lobby. Basically, all you need to be a lobbyist—not just “a” lobbyist but an effective lobbyist—are three things:

1. A few basic facts
2. Belief in your cause
3. Common sense

### **Knowledge Is Power**

The most important single thing a lobbyist needs to know is his or her subject. What is the substance of the legislation you are proposing (or opposing)? Why is it so important? What will happen if it passes? What will happen if it does not pass? How much will it cost?

Usually, whoever asks you to get involved in lobbying, perhaps the chair of your state component's legislative committee, the executive director, or your component president, will provide these facts along with an action alert or call for action.

### **Know Your Legislator**

It certainly helps to know the legislator or legislators you contact. What are their interests? What are their backgrounds? What is their record of support? What positions do they hold in the legislature? Who is the chair of the committee that will consider your proposal? Who is the chief spokesperson for the opposition?

An effective advocate also knows how the system works: what steps a proposed municipal ordinance, state law, or appropriation bill goes through from introduction to enactment; which committees will consider the legislation. This information is normally available through AIA staff and volunteer leadership.

### **Remember, Conviction Counts!**

Facts alone are not enough. Without conviction, dedication to the cause, loyalty to the organization, and determination to see the job through no matter how long it takes (and it can indeed take a long time!), a lobbyist won't be very effective.

### **Concentration Counts as Well**

Difficult as it is, keep your focus on just one issue. It's the only way you can successfully marshal all your resources and ultimately prevail in the tough environment you will face in any legislative fight.

### **Use Common Sense**

The minimum principles you need to know are: be brief; be clear; be accurate; be persuasive; be timely; be persistent; be grateful.

These common-sense principles apply whether you're lobbying by telephone, by letter, or face to face. The only one that's a bit difficult for the beginner is timing. There are good times, better times, and best times, and until you've become an expert in your own right, your component's staff or volunteer leadership should call the shots on timing.

### **Don't Make Promises**

Never promise reward for good behavior or threaten retribution for failure to support you. Be persuasive rather than argumentative or demanding. Don't knock the opposition; they probably believe in their position as sincerely as you believe in yours.

When you write, keep your letter or fax to a single page—literally. If you need more space, include an attachment elaborating on that one-page summary. Be absolutely sure you spell your legislator's name correctly, have the correct title, and get the address right. If you don't, he or she will wonder how credible the rest of your letter is. And, of course, always personalize your letter. Get the facts from your organization, but use your own words on your own stationery.

### **Meeting Face-To-Face**

The first time you meet face-to-face with your Representative or Senator—or, for that matter, your city councilman—you probably will have butterflies in your stomach. It would be unusual if you didn't.

If you'd feel better having a few others along, fine. Just make sure those who accompany you can also speak to the matter at hand and are not obviously just along for the ride. Keep the group size small. The fewer present, the more candid the legislator will be.

### **Always Be Brief**

Again, as in writing, be brief. Make an appointment, be on time, state your case, and leave. Plan to cover your topic in five minutes if possible, ten minutes at the most. Don't linger unless your legislator chooses to prolong the meeting.

### **You Are the Expert**

In many cases, you may find that you know more about the topic at hand than the legislator or staff. This is because elected officials and their staff tend to be generalists. They handle a wide range of complex subjects, from regulation to the environment to education, and generally can't be experts in everything. That's where you come in. If they like and trust you, they will rely on your advice and knowledge.

Just remember, if you get hit with any questions you can't answer, admit it and provide the answers later. Don't bluff—it always shows. When you depart, hand your host a written summary—again, a one-pager—of your position, and state exactly what it is you want him or her to do about it. You should be able to get this resource from your state or local AIA component.

### **Be Patient**

It takes a sales person an average of 13 tries with a prospect before making a sale, and legislative offices offer a similar challenge. So be both patient and persistent.

### **Aides Are Influential**

Do not be offended if you don't get to see the boss. Even if you had a firm appointment, you may be referred instead to an assistant. The demands on a legislator's time are unbelievable, and quite often he or she cannot avoid last-minute changes in schedule.

Never underestimate the importance of an aide. Treat him or her just as you would your legislator, not only as a matter of courtesy, but because the aide is in a position to advance your cause or sink it without a trace.

### **Say Thank You**

When you get back home, or after you've talked with your legislator by phone, or after he or she has voted your way or done something else to help you, send a thank-you letter. The vast majority of all mail a legislator gets is either asking for personal favors, complaining about something the government has or has not done, or blasting the legislator for something he or she has or has not done. A thank-you letter really scores. Besides, it's the polite thing to do.

### **Always Report Back**

Report back to your AIA state component. Whom did you see or talk with? What did you discuss? What was his or her position? Your report and those of other volunteers are indispensable to your leadership in planning strategy.

### **Following Up Is Vital**

The sad truth is that many legislative offices will ignore your first request for a specific action. Frankly, they have so many people asking for so many things that they want to know that you're serious about your request before spending precious staff resources. The way to demonstrate that you are serious is to ask again. By asking again, you demonstrate that you really are serious, and that you'll keep asking until you get an answer!

### **What, You Lobby?**

Of course you can. It's fun, it's stimulating, you'll learn a lot, and you'll be a real participant in this business called democracy. Not only will you help bring about change that you feel is important, but you'll get more satisfaction out of lobbying than you ever imagined while having a positive influence on the architectural profession.