



AIA Best Practices:

The architect in the political process

Contributed by William M. Polk, FAIA

Summary

Participation in legislative affairs is one way an architect can benefit the profession. To make meaningful contact with legislators, architects should know a few fundamentals concerning legislative affairs, lobbying, elections, and component organization. Adherence to these fundamentals will help architects effectively present their interests and concerns to legislators.

Building coalitions

To be effective, government institutions require individual participation at every level. At the same time, the world of politics is a world of coalitions. Coalitions—be they chapters, societies, committees, task forces, or just loosely knit groups with similar motivations—provide useful and effective frameworks through which individuals may participate in legislative affairs.

Fundamentals

Get to know your legislator. Approach this task as if you were attempting to make the legislator a client. Look for occasions such as town, club, or organization meetings when the conversation can be light and you can become comfortable with each other. Find out what makes the legislator tick. On what committees does he or she serve? What issues are important to the district? As you gather this information, you develop a better understanding of how best to present your issue.

It is always easier to get the ear of a friend. As your friend, the legislator is not wondering who you are, where your interests lie, who your allies are, or what your political involvement may be. He or she already knows. You will be better able to explain your issue in terms the legislator can relate to—and to do it quickly, without a lot of getting-acquainted small talk.

Become involved in the legislative process. It is far easier to change a bill before it becomes law than to change the law later. The dynamics of the legislative scene keep shifting—sometimes day by day and hour by hour. This compels many associations, including AIA and its components, to lobby as an ongoing part of legislative activity.

Limit your issues. As all citizens do, architects have the right to speak out on any issue. However, their effectiveness diminishes if they are vocal on too many issues or issues outside their professional expertise. As a result, most architects choose to limit their issues to the handful that are most important to the

profession. Too many issues sap energy; they also provide legislators with the opportunity to allow the profession minor victories while thwarting its main goals.

Understand the separation of powers. Recalling the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government focuses our professional concern on those who can actually help. Yet the separation of powers is not always clear. Some legislative functions are delegated to the executive branch. The executive veto is a form of legislative action. Likewise, the writing of administrative rules and procedures by departments, commissions, offices, or bureaus is a legislative activity. Many celebrations after a bill has passed a state legislature have been ruined by a gubernatorial veto. Many successful advocates of legislation have searched for what went wrong after the administrative rules were published. Conversely, many have achieved their legislative goals through the writing of rules and the power of the veto.

Learn how the system works. The road from introduction of legislation to its passage can be long and rocky. Legislative leadership can assign a bill to a committee whose members may be philosophically opposed to it. Committee chairs can exert influence by holding hearings too late to give a bill a reasonable chance of clearing all the hurdles. The rules committee chair may order the calendar to place a bill early or late for consideration. The involved citizen architect is in a position to monitor these subtle but critical influences.

Lobbying

The legislator's stock-in-trade is good information. Thus, information is the currency by which the legislative advocate, whether a professional lobbyist or a citizen architect, gains the legislator's ear and confidence.

Providing information. Legislative staff provide research on general issues; the lobbyist provides information detailing the impact of a proposal on the lobbyist's own group. The information provided must be factual and well organized. It is recognized that this information supports the lobbyist's point of view, but it is expected to be accurate and complete. Once an individual or group is known to provide worthwhile information, the system will seek that information.

Provide legislative staff members with extensive documentation supporting your view; the legislator, in most cases, will appreciate a summary. Some legislators are satisfied only if they do their own staff work, and they must be supplied with copies of documentation. Generally speaking, though, time constraints will dictate accepting someone's evaluation of the facts surrounding a proposal.

Testifying. Testimony before a committee has the appeal of reaching committee members, staff, and news media at one time. You have no guarantee, however, that you will have the undivided attention of all those present. They may be preoccupied, still thinking about the last presentation or discussing other issues among themselves. You will want to be alert to the personal dynamics of the committee, just as you would be before an architect selection committee. Always leave at least a written summary of your presentation with the members.

Constituent contact. Since constituents gain the attention of the legislator first—even if the legislator disagrees with the proposal—constituent contact is an essential ingredient in any lobbying effort. If a constituent is involved, the legislator is more likely to return the phone call, answer the letter, or make an appointment. Coalitions that focus constituent contact on individual legislators get things done.

Visit the legislators you know. Take them to lunch, make an appointment to see them in their offices, or, if necessary, wait at their office doors until they are available. Legislators are impressed by those who have determination—particularly if they are also constituents. When you are given time, make the most of it. Communicate what you have to say in an organized and straightforward way.

Make it personal. The most important information you can get across to a legislator is the impact the proposal in question will have on you. Translate the issue into a concrete example. Personalize it. This is information that can come from no other source, which gives the legislator a unique piece of information that no one else knows. This can be immensely valuable in arguing amendments as well as a gold mine to the legislator during debate on the floor.

Offer your assistance. Offer to be a resource for information on issues affecting architecture and the environment. This can be accomplished in many ways. For example, the legislator's staff could send you copies of all legislation in which the profession is interested for your review and comment. This is another opportunity to personalize the issues and to maintain contact with your legislator.

A final word. No matter the outcome, thank the legislators you called on for their consideration, and thank the ones who voted with you. Give those who supported your cause credit in chapter newsletters and other public communications. While it is correct to inform chapter members about who opposed the AIA position, there is nothing to be gained by abrasive or antagonistic talk. Be graceful in victory or defeat because there will be another occasion when you will be searching the legislature for friends.

Elections

The best way to become known is to help a legislator become elected. Every candidate for office needs organizers, workers, information, and financing. Successful campaigns require planning; selection and articulation of issues; effective communication and advertising; newsletters, signs, and other graphics; and, most important, lots of one-on-one contact and conversation. Your decision to contribute time, talent, and/or funds is a personal one. You may decide to become involved through regular political party activities or through special committees and independent campaigns organized around specific candidates for office.

Get organized

Working through AIA is essential to successful legislative efforts intended to benefit the profession. To coordinate your activities with AIA's, participate in your chapter's government affairs program. (If no such program exists, AIA's *Component Operations Manual* has a section on how to organize one.) This program should be the focal point for discussion among chapter members who want to identify issues of concern and set chapter goals and priorities. The government affairs program should also be charged with coordinating with other chapters and organizations such as those for engineers; landscape architects; interior designers; contractors; and real estate, preservation, and environmental groups—any organization with which an effective alliance can be built.

About the contributor

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