

Guide For Communicating With Legislators

Meeting With Your Legislator

Personal meetings, either to discuss a specific issue or just to introduce yourself as an interested and involved constituent, are the most effective means of political communication.

Meetings are sometimes difficult to arrange, given a legislator's busy schedule, but they are just as vital as any other important business meeting. The initial contact can be made with the legislator directly or through key staff members. Unless you already know your legislator, you should write, rather than phone, to request an appointment.

Do not overlook the opportunity to meet with a staff member, particularly if he or she is working closely with the legislator on an issue of concern to you. Further, try to schedule meetings with your legislator when he or she is in his/her legislative district visiting constituents.

It is important to be familiar with key aspects of the issue before the meeting. This does not mean that you must be an expert. You should, however, be prepared to discuss how an issue affects you, your family and your community. Here are a few pointers for a successful meeting:

Be concise and well organized, and try to state your views in 10 minutes or less. Be firm in your remarks while being attentive to the legislator's views as well.

Never forget that this meeting is an open exchange of ideas, and not an opportunity for you to lecture the legislator.

Prepare a one-page summary of key points about your position on the issue at hand. Leave a copy with the legislator at the conclusion of your meeting. Be sure to include your name and a way to contact you should the legislator need additional information from you.

Follow-up your meeting with a thank you note and re-emphasize key points which were discussed. You may also wish to write a note of thanks to those staff people who helped arrange or participated in the meetings. This is a good time to send any additional data or information that you may have promised to provide.

Telephone Call Tips

When a bill is coming up for a vote, and time is so short that you cannot get a letter mailed to your legislator in time, telephoning is probably your best means of communicating your point of view.

When you know your legislator well, and can expect to get him or her on the phone, it is reasonable to try to call them. Many of the techniques outlined in the following section on letter writing also apply to telephone calls.

Be aware that you will only have a few minutes for the conversation, and that you will need to be very concise and exact in expressing your view.

Always identify yourself as a constituent. If you cannot speak directly with the legislator, leave your name, telephone number, and your key points of view with a staff person.

Following are general phone numbers through which you can reach any legislator with whom you would like to speak.

House of Representatives - Information
(803)734-3143

Senate - Information
(803)212-6500

South Carolina General Assembly Website
www.lpittr.state.sc.us

Letter Writing Tips

The following tips will help to ensure that you are effective when corresponding with a legislator:

Use personal or business stationery when writing to the legislators. Typewritten letters are preferable, but handwritten letters can also be very effective.

Address the letter correctly. On the envelope and on the inside of address, refer to the elected official as "The Honorable _____"

For example: The Honorable
South Carolina Senate
P.O. Box 142
Columbia, SC 29202

The Honorable
South Carolina House of Representatives
P.O. Box 11867
Columbia, SC 29211

Be sure to include your return address on the letter, if it is not on letterhead, Your greeting should always be "Dear Senator/Representative last name:"

Keep your comments short and to the point, and clearly state your reason for writing. Cover only one issue per letter.

Always include the bill number and title about which you are writing. Explain how the issue would affect you and how you feel it could impact your community.

Be reasonable. Make sure your request is realistic. Never resort to threats. Be courteous and respectful in all communications. Ask the legislator to explain his or her position on the issue with a letter or phone call.

Remember to write when your legislator does something that deserves recognition and thanks. Words of appreciation will be remembered. By the same token, write to express your disappointment when a legislator does not support your position on an issue and votes against your interests. You deserve to express your opinion on any issue.

Constituent Relationships: Building a Solid Foundation

Keep up with how your legislator and how he or she votes. Express your reaction to those votes on issues in which you are interested.

Invite your legislator to speak at a local meeting.

Ask to receive the legislator's newsletter.

Invite your legislator to visit your office.

Invite your legislator to lunch and be prepared to discuss important issues.

Attend political functions and fundraisers in the district.

Get personally involved in your legislator's election campaign.

Consider hosting a fundraiser in your home or local meeting place for the candidate. Hosting a "meet and greet", or non-fundraising reception, is an option as well.

Get to know his or her family, and about their life outside of the legislature.

After developing a personal relationship, invite your legislator to social functions.

When your legislator begins to seek your opinion on matters and considers you an informational resource, that is a sign that you have been successful in building a productive constituent relationship!

Office Visits: Key to an Open-Door Policy

Visiting your legislator in his or her Capitol Complex office affords you several invaluable opportunities. If you have never met him or her in person, putting faces with names will benefit you both in the future.

There simply is no substitute for face to face communication with a lawmaker. In personal meetings, you have a captive audience. The following should help to make your personal visit a productive and meaningful one:

Inform your legislator in writing that you plan to be in Columbia, and would like to drop by their office for a visit. Don't be discouraged if he or she has a booked schedule. It may take several tries before you are able to arrange this meeting, but your patience and persistence will pay off.

Read highlights of the legislator's biography before your meeting so that you are aware of what you may have in common.

Be sure to introduce yourself to his or her staff. They can be very helpful in your future dealings with the legislator.

Write a note of thanks after you have visited the legislator's office. Make specific references to your visit. Be certain to include any additional information your legislator requested or you promised.

Take photographs and send them to the legislator.

Committee Hearings: Tips on Testifying

Open your remarks with "Mr. or Madame Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of.."

If you are a constituent of one of the committee members, be sure to mention it.

Tell the legislators specifically what you want. Keep your statement as simple and brief as possible, and base your remarks on irrefutable facts instead of mostly on matter of opinion.

Do not read to the committee. Maintain eye contact with the committee members as you present your testimony. Address one issue at a time, and don't get sidetracked.

Use a real life story, if at all possible.

If members of the committee speak during your testimony, remember to listen as much or more than you speak.

Provide a written summary of your testimony in an easy-to-read format.

Attend prior meetings to see how the hearing process goes for that particular committee or subcommittee.

Cite support from other interested parties.

Try to foresee questions you may be asked, some of them possibly difficult, and be prepared to answer them. Remember when to say, "I don't know, but I will get back with you"

Establishing a Rapport with Legislators

Be Accurate and Factual

The fact that you want or do not want, a piece of legislation to pass is not a sufficient argument. You must support your position with facts, and be credible and respectful in your presentation of those facts. A legislator hopefully considers you a resource of information. If you present inaccurate information, your credibility may be seriously jeopardized.

Give Credit Where Credit is Due

When your position prevails, thank everyone involved in the success. When your position is defeated, it is still critical to thank everyone who made an effort to help you. The legislative process is a team effort.

Learn to Evaluate Issues Objectively

The introduction of legislation does not mean that it will become law. In fact, many bills do not become law. Before forming an opinion about any legislation, learn the "who" "what" and "why" of it. Realize that there is almost always more than one side to a story, and try to determine how each interested party views the legislation.

Endorse Your Legislator

When a legislator deserves re-election, offer him or her your support. Financial support is critical to campaigns, as are workers and volunteers. Remain loyal to those legislators who have been helpful to you.

Be Brief

Legislators are "tugged at" from hundreds of groups weekly. A well prepared and informative person can present his case to a legislator in a short period of time. The legislator will appreciate your respect for his or her busy schedule. If you have very detailed information you would like to share with him or her, offer it in writing.

A summary of highlights and bullet points always offers an overview of facts in a concise and easily understandable format.

Always make yourself available to provide additional information. Thank the legislator

for his or her time when calling or meeting.

Be Fair

Your legislator represents all constituents regardless of political party. Don't chastise a lawmaker when he or she does not share your particular view.

Be Understanding

Put yourself in the legislator's place by trying to understand his or her position on an issue. He or she wants to be helpful, and needs to be fully informed of all aspects of a situation.

Be Reasonable

Recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinions. Never indulge in threats or recriminations, You will seem defensive in your debate, and may erase positive steps you have already made.

Be Friendly

Do not contact legislators only when you need something from him or her. Keep in touch with them, and never be remiss in thanking them with a letter or phone call when they provide assistance.

Be Thoughtful

Thank the legislator when he or she supports your cause. Commend him or her, and let him or her know you are following his or her progress and hard work.

Be Cooperative

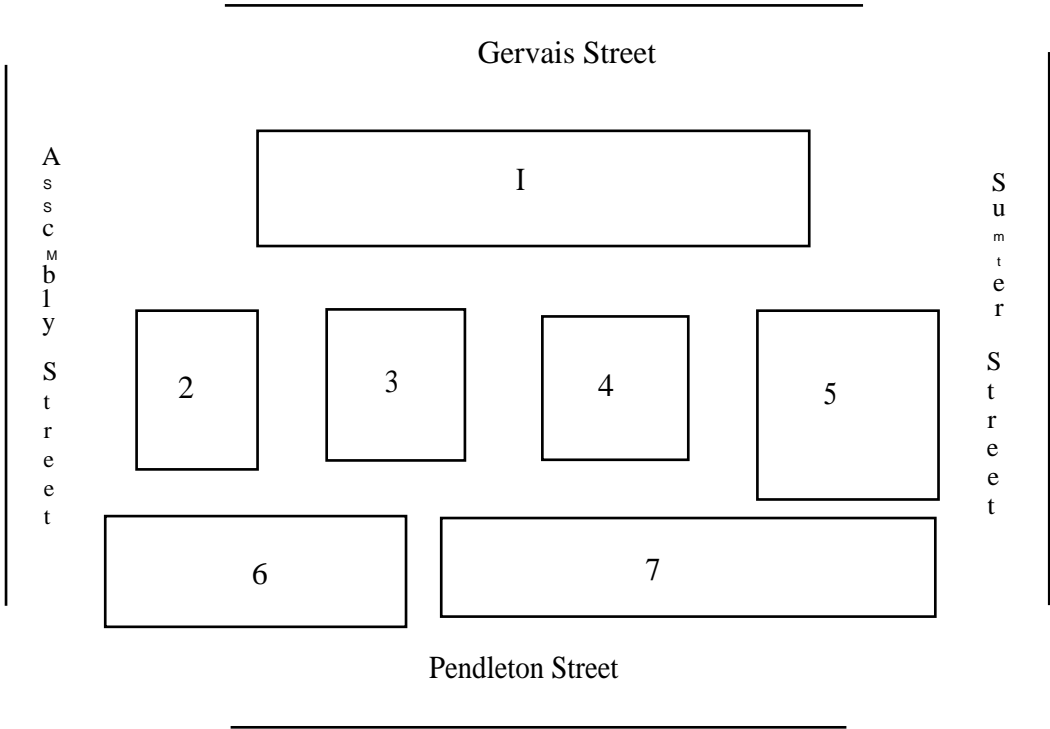
If your legislator makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. Supply him or her with information and facts that will help him or her better understand an issue or point of view.

Be Realistic and Reasonable

Remember that legislation is usually the result of compromise. Do not expect everything to get and not give.

Do not be critical of compromise if you involve yourself in the legislative process.

Map of the South Carolina Capitol Complex



Buildings of the Capitol Complex

- 1. South Carolina State House
- 2. Dennis Building
- 3. Gressette Building
- 4. Wade Hampton Building
- 5. Calhoun Building
- 6. Blatt Building
- 7. Brown Building