

# GUIDE TO INTERACTING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR

This guide has been prepared to assist you in effectively communicating with your elected representatives. The time you take in personally contacting your legislators, either by written or spoken word, is very important. Although the general principles of effective communication are the same for local, state and federal lawmakers, there are differences between how their offices are structured, staffed, and operated. We have attempted to highlight these differences below with a particular focus on state and federal legislators.

Legislators want to hear from their constituents, especially those who are educated on the political and social issues of the time. They want to hear from you regarding the issues that affect you, and issues for which you have a specific expertise. When it comes to licensure, they need to hear from the practitioners themselves. Use the fact sheets provided by ASLA to guide your discussion with legislators, but also use local examples from your practice that can help the legislator relate to the issue(s) at hand.

Several types of communication can be effective in building a relationship with your lawmaker. As a constituent, you can develop and maintain an ongoing, working relationship with the local, state, and federal government officials representing your area. It is best to initiate these relationships before critical issues reach decision points or you need to call on them for assistance.

## Legislative Staff

Legislators appoint staff to assist them in carrying out their duties and serving their constituents. In many cases, especially at the federal level, you will more frequently interact with staff than the Representative or Senator. Building effective working relationships with staff is just as important, and can be more important, than doing so with the elected official. Staff research the issues, advise their bosses about the pros and cons associated with various positions, and most frequently interact with regulatory agencies that can affect your work or issues important to landscape architects. We have provided a list of common staff titles and duties at the end of this document.

**State:** It would be impossible to generalize the nature of state legislative staffs. In some states, legislators have staff members both in the State Capitol and their district offices. In others, there may be one staff person on the district level, and the legislator may actually take his/her own phone calls when in the Capitol. Sometimes several legislators share staff. The state legislative website is likely to have contact information for the legislator at the Capitol and district offices, and may provide staff contact information as well. Your local telephone book is also a good source of contact information.

**Federal:** Your U.S. Representative and Senators will have more staff and a wider array of issues before them. All have an office in Washington and maintain at least one office in their district or state. In general, district/state office staff work on local issues and help constituents to understand and navigate many government programs. Staff in the Washington office usually handles national policy issues, legislation, and media. In addition, Congressional staffers tend to be young. Do not be surprised by this, and remember that in spite of their youth, they are highly experienced, intelligent, and serve as the eyes and ears of the elected official.

## Common Elements of Effective Communication

Your past experience with working with the legislator, the urgency of the issue, and whether the legislature is in session are just some of the factors that will influence what means you will choose to contact your legislator: phone, fax, letter, email, in-person meeting. Regardless of the

mode of communication, here are some general tips to keep in mind when interacting with your representative face-to-face or in correspondence:

- Prepare well and always stick to the facts.
- Use local examples to illustrate your points. These do not necessarily have to be from your practice, but you should be familiar with the details.
- Be concise – limit written correspondence to no more than two pages.
- Be prepared to have sound reasons to reinforce your position.
- Offer to follow up with more if you do not know the answer to a question.
- When you are unable to achieve the desired result or response do not get angry - try and maintain a positive relationship with your legislator.
- Be persistent without harassing a legislator once the initial message has been delivered. Following up on requests after two weeks is a good rule of thumb.
- Learn to "read" the legislator's response (legislators normally do not give a totally negative or positive response to many requests or questions about their position).
- Always write and thank your legislator after meetings and when he or she takes an action you have requested.

### **Making Initial Contact With Your Legislator**

Take advantage of every opportunity to meet and become better acquainted with your elected officials. Opportunities may develop through local civic or charitable organizations, political functions, town hall meetings, or by requesting a meeting. Contact initiated through such meetings can evolve quickly into relationships that permit discussion of licensure, public policy issues, and other concerns. These relationships are best developed by contacts made when the legislator is home in his/her district. In these personal contacts, it is important that you be positive and constructive in your remarks. It is best to begin building the relationship with your legislator when you do not need anything from them.

### **Arranging a Meeting With Your Legislator**

Meeting with your legislator is an effective way to convey a message about a specific legislative issue. It helps your representative to understand how legislation or other government action affects his/her constituents. Keep the following in mind when scheduling a meeting:

- Unless you already know your legislator well, you should write to request a meeting. Suggest a time and date, or several dates, for the visit. State the purpose of the meeting.
- Plan your visit carefully. Be clear about what it is you want to achieve and the talking points that you will use to get your point across.
- Whenever possible, bring information and materials supporting your position to the meeting.
- Be flexible - there will be times when a legislator will be unable to make the appointment. Be prepared to meet with a staff person instead and proceed as you would have with the legislator.
- Always send a thank you note to your legislator following a meeting to reinforce the issues that you discussed and, if applicable, thank them for their support. Be sure to follow up with any additional information that was promised in the meeting.

### **What is "The Ask?"**

When you attend Lobby Day or interact with your Chapter on legislative issues, you are likely to hear people talk about "the ask" – in other words, what will ASLA members be asking their representative to do. While providing general information and updates is useful, it is highly advisable to identify at least one specific action that you can ask your representative to take.

Having a clear “ask” helps to focus the discussion and gives the legislator and staff something specific to consider. It also helps with follow-up – it is much easier to contact an office and ask if the legislator has co-sponsored a specific bill or written a letter to a certain agency than to inquire if he or she has made a decision about “our concerns.” Furthermore, in many cases, if you do not ask for specific assistance or action, neither the legislator nor staff will likely volunteer. The following are general examples of an “ask”:

- *Sponsor or co-sponsor a piece of legislation* – Sponsor means to be the first person to introduce a measure while co-sponsor means to join others members as an identified supporter of a measure before it comes to a vote.
- *Vote for or against a piece of legislation.*
- *Write a letter to another member of the legislature or a state/federal agency or department* – Legislators routinely write letters on behalf of constituents to inquire about and/or encourage/discourage regulatory action.
- *Co-sign a letter written by another legislator* – In the Congress in particular, Representatives and Senators frequently circulate letters to agency heads or Congressional leaders among their colleagues and invite them to sign it. The goal is to have as many members sign as possible in order to demonstrate widespread support for an issue or action.
- *Visit a project site or place of business* – Legislators are usually interested in seeing and better understanding public projects in their districts and many regularly visit businesses to learn more about their products and services and to meet with employees.

## **Communicating With Your Legislator**

There are many ways to communicate with your legislator – letters, phone calls, emails, and face-to-face meetings. Regardless of the method you choose, several common principles apply, including those identified above. The following are designed to provide additional information applicable to specific modes of communication and differentiate between state and federal levels where appropriate.

### **Speaking With Your Legislator via Telephone**

At most times, it is best to meet in person with your legislator. However, if you have already met with him/her, the legislative schedule is keeping the legislator particularly busy, or your bill needs quick action, you may want to schedule an appointment for a meeting via telephone. This section applies primarily to state legislators – it is unlikely that you will speak with your U.S. Representative or Senator on the telephone.

- Look in your telephone book for the local and Capitol phone numbers. Information is also available on the state website.
- Be organized. Jot down the ideas you wish to convey ahead of time.
- Identify yourself, explain why you are calling, and why you feel the way you do.
- Ask your legislator's position on the issue.
- If your legislator agrees with you, thank him/her. If they disagree or are undecided, discuss the concerns factually.
- If the legislator is not available, speak with his/her staff (if applicable) or leave a message.

### **Writing To Your Legislator**

Because much of a legislator's time during session is spent in the state capital or Washington, many of your communications will be written. Personal letters are the basic tool for you to express your views. While typing a letter may seem a bit out-moded, survey after survey of Congressional staff, particularly, demonstrate that offices overwhelmingly view these letters as

the most clear and direct expression of constituents' views and recognize those constituents felt strongly enough about them to take time to write. In most cases, these are the letters that staff read most closely and they receive a response more quickly than most other correspondence. In particularly urgent situations, mailing a letter may not be practical (fax it instead) and email can be an effective mode of communication as well (see discussion below). Keep the following in mind when writing a letter (or email as appropriate):

- Use your personal stationery or business letterhead. Be sure to include your home address so that they can identify you as a constituent and respond to your letter.
- Make sure of the legislator's proper district and how to spell his/her name (websites maintained by state legislatures and the U.S. House and Senate are useful sources for this information). When writing to those in leadership positions, it is proper to use the following:  
Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman:  
Dear Mr. Speaker or Madam Speaker:
- Avoid using jargon and unexplained acronyms where possible.
- Whenever possible, use exact bill numbers and proper titles (i.e. HB 1, HR 123, Landscape Architectural Licensing Act).
- Educate your legislator to the pertinent facts regarding the licensure issue - what the bill would do and how it affects the public health, safety, and welfare. Also demonstrate the effect of the bill on you (the constituent).
- Sign your name legibly and type or print your name below the signature.

**Federal:** After letters containing anthrax were mailed to several U.S. Senators, the House and Senate instituted new screening procedures for all incoming letters, packages, and other materials sent through the U.S. Mail or delivered by private carriers, such as UPS and Fed Ex. Although letters remain a highly effective method of communicating, it is important to note that screening can delay delivery of U.S. Mail, especially, by several weeks. Time-sensitive correspondence should be faxed or sent to offices via private carrier. Do NOT assume that an email will be opened, let alone read, by Congressional staff the day it is sent.

## Email

It goes without saying that email is increasingly becoming the dominant mode of communication in almost any field. As you know from your own experience, the ease with which messages can be sent to millions with the push of a button has dramatically increased the volume of email, much of it unwanted, that we receive every day. Legislators routinely receive hundreds of emails every day and the number can increase exponentially when important issues are being debated. Furthermore, email communication tends to be short and often relies on sending messages back and forth between parties to clarify issues. It is important to keep this in mind when communicating with legislators who may not have all the facts about certain issues and do not have the time to repeatedly follow-up requesting more details.

Although email can be an effective means of communicating with elected officials, it is important to keep the following in mind:

- Follow the guidance above concerning letters – the information needs are the same even though the mode of communication is different.
- The volume of email, especially at the federal level, has led many offices to develop increasingly sophisticated means to screen email from most sources other than constituents. It is imperative to provide clear information at the outset demonstrating that you are a constituent.
- Do not expect detailed responses the same day.

- Do not expect to maintain a thread of communication with the office – you are likely to receive a single detailed reply, and that may arrive via U.S. Mail rather than email. Repeatedly emailing on the same subject is likely to undermine your position.
- Do not assume that the legislator or his/her staff will see your message on the day it is sent. If you have particularly urgent issues to address, such as your licensure bill is up for a vote that day, call the legislator's office and express your views.

### How Legislators Assess an Issue

It will help you to understand how a legislator reviews issues and decides how to react to a call for action from a constituent. The following are some guidelines for legislative decision-making:

- Do the issues appear to be negotiable? Be sure you can tell the legislator how other stakeholders feel about the issue.
- Is the issue a priority for stakeholders? If potential opponents have chosen to remain neutral, this will be important information to provide to the legislator. Be sure to let the legislator know of any other groups that support the legislation.
- What is the impact of the issue on his/her district or state?
- Timing. Is there enough time for parties to deliberate? Is it an emergency situation, such as if a sunset date were approaching? Is a deadline "pushing" a decision, helping ensure a defined time frame for the process?
- Are any of the parties seeking to clarify a legal question or establish a legal precedent? This situation can be particularly important to legislators, many of whom may be wary of setting precedent or establishing policy for the very first time.
- What are the relationships among the parties? Is there a history of conflict or is this issue a onetime occurrence?
- Is funding from the legislature necessary? If so, how much \$\$\$?

### Commonly Used Staff Titles

The following are examples of the types of staff you may encounter in Congressional offices (not every office will have every position).

DISTRICT/STATE OFFICES	
Title	Duties
District/State Director	Manages operation of district/state office(s), supervises staff, often represents the legislator at public functions that he or she may be unable to attend.
Field Representative	Serves as a liaison between the legislator's office and specific areas of the district or state or with certain constituencies (business, labor, local elected officials).
Caseworker	Assists constituents in dealing with federal agencies and departments frequently as relates to receiving government benefits (Social Security, veterans benefits).
Scheduler	Develops and manages the legislator's schedule for meetings, events, etc. In some offices, this person might only handle scheduling of district or state-based activities while in others he/she might be responsible for all scheduling.

<b>WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE</b>	
Title	Duties
Chief of Staff/Administrative Assistant	Manages the operation of the entire office (including state or district), provides direct supervision of DC-based staff, serves as the chief political advisor for the Representative or Senator. Some may handle media as well.
Legislative Director	Manages and supervises legislative staff, develops and oversees implementation of the member's legislative agenda, may be responsible for handling high profile policy issues.
Legislative Assistant	Responsible for much of the legislative and policy work usually covering a range of issues, drafts correspondence, meets with constituents.
Legislative Correspondent	Primarily responsible for drafting and transmitting constituent correspondence, may handle one or two specific issues.
Press Secretary/Communications Director	Serves a chief spokesperson with press, drafts press releases, speeches, other materials, advises member concerning communications strategy.
Scheduler	Develops and manages the legislator's schedule for meetings, events, etc. In some offices, this person might only handle scheduling of Washington-based activities while in others he/she might be responsible for all scheduling.
Staff Assistant	Primarily responsible for administrative functions – answering phones, opening mail, greeting visitors.