

Meeting With Your Legislator

Personal meetings, either to discuss a specific issue or just to introduce you 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.

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 business 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.
- Leave a copy of your key points 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.
- 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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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 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 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.

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

Lancaster County