

# Influencing the Legislative Process

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**T**here are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what is happening. Advocates for libraries want to be in the first group, making good things happen for libraries in North Carolina. Library advocates want to influence state and local governmental entities so that library needs are among the priority items for elected officials.

As the special needs that are competing for the state tax pie increase, each slice of the pie gets smaller. This requires that advocates of the programs being funded do an even more thorough job of acquainting members of the General Assembly with the effectiveness of an individual program in meeting the needs of citizens.

Tax dollars must be used to address the most urgent needs of the people. The specific benefits of libraries to a given community become tools of influence when advocates vie for a slice of the tax pie or for policy changes in state statutes.

The first step in influencing state legislators, either for policy changes or funding, is to know the "players in the game," the ones you want to influence. Webster's Dictionary defines a politician as "one who is versed in the art and science of government; especially one who is actively engaged in the business of government." Many elected officials see themselves more as public servants, because public service is politics. Regardless of the perspective, you as a library advocate are interested in influencing the politicians elected to "engage in the business of government" in the General Assembly of North Carolina.

Begin by building rapport with your legislator. Know who represents you in the North Carolina Senate and North Carolina House of Representatives. Become familiar with the personalities with which you will be dealing and make personal contact with your legislators. Do this by an invitation to the library, a visit to their

offices or other means of communication. Make sure they know who you are when you call or write. Knowing how the legislative system works would be beneficial and may prove interesting to you personally. I continue to be surprised at the number of citizens that do not even know that there are 50 senators and 120 representatives, let alone know what we do. Remember, legislators are regular people with a difficult task to perform as they represent their constituency. Be patient and cooperative as you try to develop this relationship.

Communicate with your legislators! We appreciate the information and the opinions of those most directly impacted by our decisions. Whether you communicate by letter or phone, be as specific as possible. Provide the bill number, the title, or the subject of the legislation, if possible. In the 106 legislative days of the 1991 Session, there were 2,280 bills introduced. With that many proposed pieces of legislation, you should understand why we may not immediately respond with the particular bill that causes you concern. Know your subject matter so you can influence with knowledge.

When you phone or write with specific identification of the legislation, indicate why you support or oppose the bill. Your reasons could be particularly helpful to a legislator's deliberations. In determining whether to support or oppose a bill, legislators may consider various factors. One immediate consideration is the bill's impact on the "folks back home" and the particular group the bill may be directed toward. Other questions to raise may be: how much will the proposal cost, has the money been appropriated, what alternatives could be considered, does this change in the law improve the situation or maintain the status quo, where can cuts be made, etc. A legislator's basic philosophi-

cal beliefs guide the decision on a bill as profoundly as anything else.

If you have a special interest in a bill, stay informed on its progress. Bill Status is a support service of the General Assembly just for this purpose. The up-to-date status of legislation is available through 919/733-7779. This service can tell you if the bill is in committee, which committee, and if it is on the calendar for a vote. A bill must pass three votes in each chamber to become law, so you have several opportunities to influence the outcome.

Be accurate when dealing with legislators. It is also helpful to be brief. Reports or

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briefing papers are more likely to get immediate attention if they are concise. Bulky documents are put aside for when we have more time in our hectic schedules. Brief is better for immediate results.

It is important for you to make sure that legislators know what you are talking about when you communicate on an issue. You may need to educate your legislator regarding library programs or library issues, as well as assuring that terminology familiar to you is understood by your listener. Let your legislator know how a proposed bill will affect you or your programs. That is using your expertise to influence further in a beneficial way, and the information will be appreciated by your citizen legislator. We have to be "jacks-of-all-trades" in the Legislature, so we seek the help of experts, especially in our constituency.

Over time, you may wish to build a

broad base of support for your issues. This could include local officials, community groups and library advocates—library trustees, advisory councils, etc., contacting legislators on your behalf. Local people can influence those for whom they can vote.

Be tolerant with your legislators. You may lose them on one vote or on one bill, but you may get their support on the next. If they support you eight out of ten times,

the first group you want to favorably influence is the committee chairman and the members of the committee where the bill has been assigned. That committee is the first hurdle for the bill. It must pass the committee to have any chance, and this small group is the easiest place to stop a bad idea before it becomes law. Build your support or your opposition immediately for that small group of legislators, again using local library people who can influence their local legislator who serves on the committee.

If advocacy support is not adequate for a group's issues, a hired lobbyist is an alternative to consider. Usually a lobbyist is hired by an organization or a group that has several issues before the General Assembly. Another reason for a lobbyist could be the anticipation of multiple bills that impact the industry or the special interest group. Lobbyists can get your bills drafted and acquire sponsors for you also.

Lobbyists can contact committee members to influence them on your behalf, nurture the bill through the process, and be alert for proposals that adversely affect your group. Lobbyists can be hired

for the entire session or to work one piece of legislation. Some groups have a volunteer who performs the same service for free that lobbyists are paid to do. When there are few bills or issues with which to be concerned, a lobbyist may be more of an expense than a group can justify. A volunteer may be quite adequate in conjunction with local advocates. You must determine your needs and equate the cost.

When you have developed a good proposal, choose a champion for your cause, a legislator who believes in your issues. Your champion, because he/she is sold on the idea, can convince other legislators to believe in your issue. The sooner you start the wheels turning on your proposals, the longer you will have to get legislators educated on the issue and the better your chances of getting legislation approved before the session adjourns. You may need patience and perseverance, because some ideas take more than one session before they become law.

Before you begin lobbying your state senators or representatives, study the approaches that others have used to influence your decisions. The techniques that work best on you may prove helpful as you attempt to influence others, including legislators.

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surely you can consider that favorably. The point is that you keep asking for their support on your issues, be understanding when they may seem to support another view, and keep striving to educate them on your issues so that you lose them less often.

In the legislative process in Raleigh,

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