



Taking the Political Process on Its Own Terms: Hire a Lobbyist

by Edward Sheary

Long-term Speaker of the California House of Representatives, "Big Jess" Unruh, coined the phrase, "Money is the mother's milk of politics." I posit that money is also the mother's milk of libraries and that money is reason enough for our profession to take an active interest in politics. Virtually all of our funding is a direct result of the political process. In light of the intimate connection between politics and library funding, I propose that the North Carolina Library Association get serious about making libraries active players in the political game. Let's do something really bold, really political, perhaps, really unprofessional: let's hire ourselves a professional lobbyist.

This is not a new idea. The Georgia Library Association has been so represented for many years, and, virtually every trade and professional association that I know of has representation in Raleigh. We have discussed it. In 1965, NCLA engaged a legislative counsel to work with North Carolina government officials and others on behalf of improving libraries in the state. Three years ago, the North Carolina Public Library Directors Association actually voted to enter into negotiations with NCLA on this issue. The question was sidetracked early on when the subject of paying for it came up.

Why a lobbyist? The word itself has "high negatives" in the current parlance. Lobbyists are usually referred to by such obfuscating terms as "Legislative Counsel." Further, most librarians do not see themselves as having much to do with politics. As professionals, we tend to forget where our paychecks come from, and we don't look much further than our own institutional contexts: county government, university, community college, or public school systems. Do we as librarians really have enough in common to formulate legislative goals that would be of interest to more than one NCLA section?

I think there is enough common interest to justify a serious NCLA legislative program. Almost all of us receive some part of our funding from the General Assembly, and all of us are subject to the sometimes capricious actions of our legislators. A recent example was the well-intentioned effort to have the Library Bill of Rights written into the statutes. House Bill 473 as introduced contained the phrasing "Public libraries shall provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues." The word "shall" in the bill is a bit different than the "should" in the original, especially when we are talking about making law. Fast action by some observant librarians got the wording changed; still, the bill vanished when it was inexplicably sent to the Appropriations Committee. The case of the disappearing bill illustrates the need for a lobbyist. Somebody knowledgeable about library issues who is known by the legislators and recognized as an authority must be on the legislative scene regularly. Our State Librarian is constrained by his position from taking a visible role in advocacy with legislators, and we practitioners are scattered across the state with little information about what is going on in the General Assembly. This is why we need a library lobbyist.

A structure that could support this is outlined by Howard McGinn in the Winter 1991 issue of *North Carolina Libraries*. There is little that I could add to the compelling case that he makes for the revitalization of NCLA. The lobbyist will not make legislative policy for us. NCLA would have to develop an effective structure for formulating legislative policy. The lobbyist can assist in coordinating initiatives and presenting them as a unified LIBRARY legislative program. It would be up to us to iron out our differences and agree on proposals that would benefit some or all of the constituencies of NCLA. The lobbyist would be our eyes and ears in the General Assembly. We would still have to provide the ideas and the voice.

Good lobbyists are not cheap. The retainer could be \$20,000 per session. We would be buying legislative expertise and an established reputation for providing reliable information among legislators. Lobbyists do not thrive in Raleigh simply because they throw good parties and make hefty campaign contributions. Most do neither. They succeed or fail on the basis of providing timely and accurate information to legislators. Employing a lobbyist would allow us to concentrate our energy on building grassroots support for libraries. Hiring a lobbyist will not require less work and commitment from us — it will require more. However, we could expect increased effectiveness in getting our points across to those who hold the purse strings.



Making an Issue of Library Support: Use the Ballot

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

There's a mass political revolt brewing in this country, and I for one would hate for the North Carolina Library Association to find itself allied with the corrupt and decadent features of the *ancien régime*. Just as we are beginning to recognize the importance of political activism, it would be a terrible mistake to follow in the footsteps of Tammany Hall and Mayor Daley. It's not that Ed is wrong to call for political involvement; in fact, he is to be applauded for his bold support of an idea whose time has come. It's just that his notion of using a lobbyist to accomplish what we should, and must, be fostering on a local level, is all wrong. In short, using a lobbyist won't get us anything other than a tarnished reputation.

The fact of the matter is, most lobbyists are "disreputable-looking types" interested in nothing other than manipulating the system for the good of their paying clients. Why settle for this type of "paid support" when we already command widespread and virtually universal support among the citizenry? The issue isn't whether or not we should try to influence the legislature — by all means let's do that! Rather, the question is how to do it without becoming part of the problem. People are sick and tired of politics as usual and are ready to voice their support for things that matter — and libraries matter!

Now, how do we translate this nebulous support into a tangible force no legislator would be willing to tangle with? Perhaps it's time to revamp such groups as the Friends of the Library into something more than just volunteer and fund-raising organizations. Restructure these bodies into a potent political voice that takes every opportunity to push for increases in library funding. Reorganize their committees, and make one, stacked with the most prominent and well-known members of the Friends, responsible for personally contacting local and state officials on a weekly, if not day-to-day, basis. In short, become so visible on a local level that our elected officials will want, and need to play to this constituency.

There are many other ways to build grassroots support (and with so many baby boomers around I'm sure one of them can remember how to organize a "movement"). The point is, library users, of which there are hundreds of thousands in North Carolina alone, represent the key to influence over all our funding agents. These people, the day-to-day users who value and benefit from library services, need to make library issues a voting priority. If politicians know that people vote based on how libraries fare in a legislative session, we won't need lobbyists, we'll need social secretaries to keep our calendars free for all the parties we'll be invited to!

Unfortunately, legislators don't always vote for, or sponsor, bills they believe in. They vote for things that will get them votes! When fifty people show up at a county commission meeting in support of a new branch, all of a sudden a project that looked like it was in jeopardy gets pushed along. Likewise, when our state legislators hear from their constituents in large numbers, they are much more likely to vote for, or against, a bill. If we really want to play politics, then the first thing we need to realize is that these guys won't listen to some two-bit library lobbyist when the really big-ticket lobbyists are just down the hall. Come on Ed, what do we have to "offer," free loans on videos? How is our lobbyist ever going to compete with contributions? If we really want to get our voices heard, let's do it the old-fashioned way. Let's hit them where it really hurts — with our votes!

*People are sick and tired of
politics as usual and are
ready to voice their support
for things that matter
— and libraries matter!*

— Tuchmayer

*Do we as librarians really
have enough in common
to formulate legislative
goals that would be of
interest to more than one
NCLA section?*

— Sheary