



TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

**GOOD CONSERVATION REQUIRES GOOD PUBLIC POLICY.
INFLUENCING IT IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK.**

BY SCOTT KOVAROVICS

FOR MORE THAN 85 YEARS, League members have led local, state, and national efforts to protect public lands, combat water and air pollution, and ensure that future generations can enjoy hunting, fishing, and the outdoors. Some of our victories are the result of Ikes doing on-the-ground conservation, such as restoring streams and picking up litter. Others are the result of pushing for stronger laws at the local, state, and federal levels.

This article provides advice for becoming better advocates for effective public policy. The first section focuses on advocacy in the legislative context, such as with a city council, state legislature, or Congress. The second section addresses the executive branch, particularly the departments and agencies that manage and regulate public land, wildlife, and outdoor recreation.

Only by combining on-the-ground work with engagement on public policy will we achieve the League's broad mission of protecting America's outdoors and recreational opportunities for future generations.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

From city hall to the halls of Congress

The thousands of representatives and senators who make up our state and federal legislatures are responsible for setting the laws and budgets for almost every aspect of society. And because they represent incredibly diverse constituencies, influencing them can be a bit like herding cats.

Although the media frequently focuses on the role "high-priced lobbyists" play in shaping decisions in Washington and state capitals, the American people can and do influence their elected representatives every day. The vast majority of elected officials really do listen to their constituents and take their concerns seriously. Most want to gather input from a wide range of interests as they make decisions. However, influencing those decisions takes hard work and sustained engagement.

The principles of effective advocacy are the same at the local, state, and federal levels. Legislators generally want to know three things: first, how the issue affects their constituents; second, who the interests are on both sides; and third, if a compromise is possible. What follows is some advice to help you to become a more effective citizen-advocate and participant in the democratic process.

IDENTIFYING YOUR LEGISLATORS

There are many tools available to help you to find phone numbers, addresses, and e-mail addresses, or even to make meeting requests.

IWLA CONSERVATION ADVOCACY CENTER

The League's online advocacy tool at <http://www.iwla.org/advocacy> allows members to identify their U.S. representatives and senators and to send letters and e-mails about important issues. League members can also stay informed about a wide array of conservation issues by signing up for e-mail action alerts.

CONGRESSIONAL WEB SITES

The House of Representatives (www.house.gov) and Senate (www.senate.gov) Web sites help users identify members of Congress based on zip code and locate lawmakers' Web sites.

STATE LEGISLATURES

Each state legislature maintains a Web site with information about legislators, committees, meeting schedules, and legislation. Your state's official Web site is a good place to start for links to the legislature. A full list of state sites can be found at http://www.usa.gov/Agencies/State_and_Territories.shtml.

LOCAL PHONE BOOKS AND LIBRARIES

Most phone books contain a section listing local, state, and federal government contacts, usually in the blue pages. Local libraries are also good resources for contact information, and librarians can often help with more in-depth research needs.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Although each legislator has his or her own preferred method of contact (phone call vs. e-mail, for instance), keep the following general guidelines in mind.

FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Most legislators, staff, and experienced advocates agree that in-person meetings are the most effective option for conveying your message. Taking the time for a meeting demonstrates that you care about issues and allows you to answer questions and explore those issues in more detail. You need not travel to Washington, D.C., or to your state capital for a meeting. Every member of Congress has one or more state or district offices, and many state legislators have local offices. Although meetings are highly recommended, they are rarely a viable option when you need to communicate quickly because most appointments are scheduled weeks in advance.

PERSONALIZED LETTERS, E-MAILS, AND FAXES

These three forms of communication can be very effective if they are personalized. In this context, personalized refers to highlighting how an issue or bill directly affects you, your family, or your community. Personalized communications catch the attention of legislators and staff because the writer has taken the time to share his or her viewpoint and to address personal or local impacts. If time is of the essence—for example, if the bill you are concerned about will be voted on in a few days—a phone call is the best option. Never assume that an e-mail or fax will be read on the day it is sent.



Senators and representatives rely on their staff to research issues, gather political intelligence, and make recommendations about the positions they should take on issues. Building a relationship with a staff person is just as important as building one with the legislator.

PHONE CALLS

If you want your legislators to know how you feel about a bill coming up for a vote within a day or two, call them. Keep in mind that phone calls are not an effective means to communicate large amounts of information or complex positions. The message must be short and make a specific request, such as how to vote on a particular bill.

SITE VISITS

Many legislators want to get out of the office and learn about issues on the ground. Site visits—such as to an Izaak Walton League chapter—are an ideal way to educate legislators and staff about specific subjects as well as your chapter's larger role in the community. Moreover, they can be good media events. Site visits require long-term planning and organization, and they can be challenging if they require travel to especially remote locations.

CONNECT WITH LEGISLATIVE STAFF

In the legislative context, especially at the federal level, you are more likely to interact with a member of a legislator's staff than with the legislator directly. Don't feel slighted. Although most legislative staff are young, they are highly skilled, professional, and knowledgeable about a wide range of issues. They are also the eyes and ears of legislators. Senators and representatives rely on their staff to research issues, gather political intelligence, and make recommendations about the positions they should take on issues. Building a relationship with a staff person is just as important as building one with the legislator.

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY TECHNIQUES

Although legislators like to hear from any of their constituents, they are especially attuned to constituents who exhibit thorough knowledge of issues and confidence in their positions. Here is some advice about ways to ensure that your voice is not only heard, but also effective.

Always be prepared, factual, and credible. Know the issues before you start, present facts to support your case, and be sure to use credible, reliable information.

Put issues in a local or personal context. When evaluating an issue and determining their position, most legislators consider a range of factors, including how it affects their district/state and different constituencies. Framing issues in a local or personal context is critically important to making the issue relevant to legislators and their staff.

Be brief. With dozens of meetings every week and ever-increasing volumes of e-mails, letters, and phone calls, legislators place a premium on brevity. Keep letters and e-mails to one page if possible. Be prepared for short meetings—frequently lasting 15 minutes or less—and don't be surprised to meet in a hallway or crowded office. Providing written background material for meetings is useful; two pages or less is a good rule of thumb.

Make a specific request. Although educating a legislator and staff about an issue is useful, it is always advisable to have at least one specific request. Common asks include introducing a bill, co-sponsoring legislation authored by other legislators, signing a letter to an agency official, or attending a meeting. A clear request helps to focus the dis-

ussion and gives legislators 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 the bill you discussed than to inquire if he or she has made a decision about "our concerns."

Don't guess if you don't know the answer. Legislators and staff may ask questions that you cannot immediately answer. Don't guess. Tell them you don't know but will get back to them. It is better to provide reliable information than to offer a response that the official or staff later learns is inaccurate.

Listen closely. Legislators and staff frequently provide nuanced answers to questions. Over time, you can learn to interpret those responses by listening carefully to what they say—and to what they don't say. For example, if your congresswoman says, "I'll take a look at your bill," that is not synonymous with "I will support it." When a staff person listens politely to your position, that does not mean his or her boss supports it. In many cases, what isn't said—such as a specific offer of support—speaks volumes.

Don't guess. It is better to provide reliable information than to offer a response that the official or staff later learns is inaccurate.

Send a thank-you note. After your meeting, send a brief letter or e-mail thanking the legislator or staff person for meeting with you. Feel free to quickly reiterate key points about your issue; however, saying "thank you" is what is most important.

Follow up. If you are asked to provide more information, be sure to do so as soon as possible. By following up on these requests, you can demonstrate that you are a reliable source of information. This is very important in developing long-term working relationships with legislators. You also want to follow up on your specific asks.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH LEAGUE CHAPTERS

Although communicating with your legislators when critical issues arise is important, your League chapter can build long-term relationships with legislators through sustained advocacy and engagement. Maintaining regular contact offers an opportunity to educate policy-makers about the breadth of activities your chapter performs. Many legislators may not know, for example, that your chapter is the largest provider of hunter education in the area or that your members routinely monitor water quality in local streams. Over time, they may reach out to you to solicit input about how conservationists feel about a particular issue or how a bill might affect water quality. The goal of advocacy is not simply to communicate about a single issue. Rather, it is to develop two-way communication across a range of issues that ultimately allows your chapter to positively affect public policy.



Requesting a meeting with staff may be especially worthwhile when an agency is asking the public for technical recommendations or to address impacts on particular constituencies.

EXECUTIVE ADVOCACY

From local land managers to the Bureau of Land Management

Whereas the legislative branch of government sets the laws that govern our society, the executive branch carries out much of the day-to-day work. In the federal government, agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service play the lead role in managing resources and ensuring that policy goals are met. That's why it's not enough to lobby just your legislators; you also should reach out to agencies.

Fortunately, there are many opportunities to engage administration officials, particularly in the natural resource agencies. They often seek out individuals and groups with demonstrated technical expertise and ongoing experience in relevant fields to help them make informed final decisions regarding a range of issues. This section provides basic information about how to get started and common opportunities to engage.

EARLY PARTICIPATION IS KEY

It is critically important to get engaged at the very beginning of an administrative process and stay engaged throughout. In many cases, local, state, and federal rules make it difficult to begin participating midway through the decision-making process. For example, stakeholder or advisory groups are frequently formed early on and given significant roles in shaping policy; however, it may be very difficult to be named to such a group after it is formed. Under federal regulations, your opportunity to challenge agency decisions may be limited if you cannot demonstrate that you participated in the public process from the beginning. A slight variant on the old adage "vote early and vote often" applies here—"participate early and participate often."

There are several common sources of information about public participation in department and agency decision-making.

DEPARTMENT/AGENCY WEB SITES

Most local, state, and federal agencies maintain Web sites that include information about public participation. On these sites, you may be able to sign up for mailing or e-mail lists that provide public notices, meeting times and locations, and other useful information.

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Department and agency rules frequently require public notices to be published in newspapers with widespread circulation, so monitor the legal and public notices section of your local paper.

FEDERAL WEB PORTALS

The federal government has several Web sites that provide general information. For example, www.usa.gov provides access to information across the government. For regulatory issues and public notices in particular, www.regulations.gov is a good place to start.

OPPORTUNITIES TO GET ENGAGED

Attend public meetings/hearings. Departments, agencies, and

commissions at all levels have public meetings and hearings as they consider policy options. Attend these meetings, provide oral comments or testimony, and keep informed about subsequent steps in the process.

Submit written comments. Most public processes offer citizens the opportunity to submit comments in writing. In general, public notices will provide information about how comments can be submitted as well as contact information for agency staff who are available to answer questions. In some cases, notices highlight specific questions that agencies want the public to address or requests for additional information about the potential impacts of a policy on particular constituencies. It is important to note that written comments are generally considered public documents after they are submitted. If you want your name and address to remain confidential, federal regulations require you to specifically request this in your comments.

Request meetings with agency staff. Requesting a meeting with staff may be especially worthwhile when an agency is asking the public for technical recommendations or to address impacts on particular constituencies. If League chapter members have the technical knowledge and experience being requested, a meeting is the ideal setting to provide input and lay the foundation for ongoing engagement. Staff contacts are frequently listed in public notices or can be found on agency Web sites.

Seek appointment to a board or commission. Especially at the local level, chapter members may have the opportunity to help establish policy by serving on boards, commissions, or advisory panels. In some cases these bodies have policy-making authority; others advise county councils or state agencies.

KEYS TO EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The keys to effective advocacy and engagement in the executive context are largely the same as discussed in the legislative arena: make your case based on facts and credible evidence, convey your points clearly and briefly, and make specific recommendations and requests. The same holds true in terms of building relationships. By participating in a process and demonstrating to agency staff that your chapter and its members are credible experts, it becomes more likely that they will reach out to you in the future on related issues.

THE LEAGUE'S STAFF ARE HERE TO HELP

One advantage of being a member of the Izaak Walton League is belonging to a group with a paid staff of experts on a wide variety of conservation issues. Staff are available to educate members and help make them stronger advocates on behalf of the League's mission. Individuals and chapters should feel free to call the national conservation and program staff with questions, for advice, or to help develop an advocacy strategy. Call the national office at (800) IKE-LINE or locate e-mail addresses for program contacts on the League's Web site, www.iwla.org.

—Scott Kovarovics is the League's conservation director.