

TCC - Project 20/20 Presentation
April 24, 2014
Greg Moore, Legislative Director for Sen. Mike Nofs

Good morning.

I was asked to talk about public policy and how you can be most effective in advocating and working with elected officials to craft good public policy. In other words, how to be a lobbyist! Not a big “L” Lobbyist in the paid professional sense, but rather in the more traditional sense of someone who works to influence public policy and policymakers. Now, I know lobbyists are generally derided by most people but in actuality they are a very important part of the process. Keep in mind that each one of you in this room probably have a lobbyist or two working on your behalf, whether you realize it or not.

So what does it take to be an effective lobbyist or advocate? Some of this may seem intuitive but for those that aren’t as familiar, the skill set for good public policy advocacy essentially boils down to good interpersonal relationship skills.

- Honesty – don’t lie or give misinformation. This is the quickest way to get marginalized or banned from an office.
- Integrity - If it doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t. Keep your word and confidences
- Sincerity/friendliness - Build a relationship and get to know your officials. With term limits turnover is constant.
- Listening skills - “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” -S. Covey
- Willingness to compromise and seek common ground. That’s the essence of policy making. Virtually every major piece of legislation is the result of a negotiated solution.
- Ability to see things from other points of view – approaching issues with “tunnel vision” or a “line in the sand” hems you in and leaves you little room to negotiate and compromise
- Disagree without being disagreeable. You’re not going to win every battle, but to be effective you need to be able to move on and live to fight another day.

Do assume:

- *that legislators want to do good public policy.* While there are bad apples in every profession my experience working with members and staff on both sides of aisle is that the overwhelming majority are there to solve problems and make MI and their districts better.
- *that legislators care about their community.* State, county and local officials live in the districts they represent and most are actively involved.
- *that legislators want to know how legislation impacts organizations & individuals in their district.* Many impacts vary widely amongst districts and parts of the state. Statewide policy advocates may not know how a broad policy impacts each local entity.
- *there’s someone else lobbying the opposing view & providing information.*
- *the old adage: “you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar” is true.* It’s not that elected officials shouldn’t be held accountable or criticized. Just be judicious! Goes back to relationship building.

Don't assume:

- *a legislator knows all about your issue or your organization.* In a term limited environment it is incumbent on your organization to regularly educate and update legislators about your organization.
- *every legislator is up on every issue.* Members deal with dozens of big issues & hundreds of bills every session. If they're not on the committee of jurisdiction it can be hard to get information or keep up with the latest changes. Giving us a heads-up on an issue of importance to you is helpful.
- *a legislator isn't interested in your issue because they don't attend your meetings.* Members face serious time constraints and usually have more requests for meetings than time available. Don't hesitate to invite staff if the legislator is not available. Main thing is to get your information communicated.
- *everything you read or hear about what's going on is accurate or the most up-to-date.* Best way to know the latest status or what a bill sponsor is trying to accomplish is to simply call or e-mail and ask.

The most effective lobby groups:

- *Speak with one voice.* This can be difficult, especially for organizations that are trying to facilitate or coordinate other groups. But, sending mixed messages places legislators in a difficult position and will likely impact your effectiveness.
- *Tell the truth and provide accurate data and information.* This builds trust and makes it more likely you will be on the "go to" list when we're looking for feedback on an issue.
- *Develop strong relationships with members AND staff, especially those in key positions* (chairman, leadership, your issue area). Staff are the gatekeepers for members and the information that comes into the office. A good relationship with staff helps ensure your message gets to where it needs to go and can give you an additional advocate.
- *Take a personal approach.* Calls & e-mails are fine, but make them personal. Members often like to use anecdotes from their districts when talking with other members. Form letters are easy, but not nearly as effective.
- *Do the leg work to rally support, build coalitions and "get the votes".* Professional lobbyists are paid to get an outcome and thus do not like to leave the counting of votes to chance. They often know the vote tally well ahead of the vote. This should be your goal as well.
- *Know the difference between "soft" and "hard" lobbying.* Soft – things you'd like to have, Hard – things you absolutely need. Calling with constant demands diminishes effectiveness.
- *Try to understand the end-game or goal.* What is it the legislature is trying to accomplish? A bill may be only one part of a larger goal or reform. Current focus is on collaboration, fiscal stewardship, data-based decisions and RESULTS. Remember, we have a CPA in the governor's office.
- *Understand the differences between the two chambers.* House more frenetic, face election every two years. Senate generally more deliberative given 4-year terms and fact that most served in the House.
- *Stand behind and support members who advocate for their cause.* Relationships are a two-way street. Be prepared to assist with manpower, data, op-eds or other resources to help accomplish the goal.
- *Understand the political landscape and what is doable and what is not.* Some issues require more time to "ripen" and gain support than others. The legislative calendar, budget season, breaks, and plain old politics are all factors.

Be aware that:

- “more money” is not a policy. If money really is the issue, be prepared to justify how you will use it to improve outcomes. Remember, legislators are under constant pressure to justify the billions of dollars in taxpayer money they appropriate annually, so results are important.
- priorities shift over time due to term limits, changes in revenues, leadership, and party control.
- on virtually every issue there is the policy and the politics. You need to be aware of both.
- facts are debatable. There are usually opposing studies, polls, and experts, as well as differing legal interpretations.
- not all Republicans or Democrats think alike or agree on everything. Try to avoid buying into group-think or political dogma. Approach each member as an individual.
- Most items pass the legislature on a bi-partisan basis

Cautions

- Be careful of your organization or key officials becoming too closely aligned with any one political party. Power and control can and does change. Aligning with one party limits your options and could put you on the outside looking in when that change comes. Many businesses play both sides because they understand it's in their best interest to maintain relationships, regardless of who is in control.
- Don't necessarily believe the talking points or stereotypes. Republicans don't hate teachers or the environment and Democrats don't hate the military or want everyone on social welfare programs. Stereotypes often become substitutes for those who don't want to spend the time building relationships.
- Avoid asking a politician to get out in front of an issue without providing support. If you want them to have courage on an issue for you, you need to have it too. Public officials usually respond to public sentiment, so make sure you're aware of what it is.
- Advocacy vs. engaging in political activity. All non-profits need to be aware of the line between these two in order to maintain their legal status. Many have received training over the years but if you're considering becoming more involved in advocacy, it might be good to get an update on the latest rules.

What specifically can you do?

- Be a resource. You are the experts in your area. We need and want that.
- Offer to testify or provide experts on your issue(s). Having a ready resource for policymakers is helpful.
- Speak with one voice whenever possible. But be aware of internal division. What may be good in a larger policy sense might not be good for each individual member.
- Invite legislators/staff to occasional forums and meetings. Try to make them as valuable as possible for you and the legislator. Often difficult with too many officials. Not much time for real interaction.
- Sustained advocacy. Not just one and done. Build the relationship and your reputation.
- Provide regular updates on your activities/issues. Not monthly minutes but consider providing occasional updates on key issues, goals, outcomes to help keep offices updated. Doesn't have to be fancy or on glossy, colored stock.

- Know your legislators and the committees they serve on as well as their key issues or areas or expertise (ie: Sen. Nofs had a 30-year law enforcement career. Law enforcement and protecting the public is a critical issue for him)
- Keep up on legislation and political news
MIRS News (mirsnews.com – subscription service)
Gongwer News (gongwer.com – subscription service)
www.legislature.mi.gov