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## Political lobbying isn't just for the pros

by ANNE LOOK

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For the price of an Amtrak ticket, Illinois residents can get off the train in Springfield, walk a few blocks to the Capitol and knock on any senator or representative's door to discuss legislation that matters to them.

Although often less experienced, concerned citizens bring a personal dimension to legislation that gives them a distinct advantage over professional lobbyists, insiders say.

But that doesn't mean that there isn't an art to effective lobbying, and the pros have a few tips to help you hone your skills.

### Connect with legislators

Build relationships with legislators away from Springfield and meet with them in-person in their district offices. Having a long-term, general relationship with them makes it easier to lobby for a specific bill, said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois, Springfield.

"The more you can do face-to-face, the better off you are," Redfield said. "Legislators tend to be people-persons. They value interpersonal relationships and are good communicators. They like to take the measure of people."

"Citizens are often the most effective, because they're sincere and they're voters," he explained.

Educate legislators about your issue and invite them to meet the people and places impacted by your bill, Redfield recommended.

"It humanizes it. It puts a human face on it," he said.

Legislators tend to be busier and more guarded in their responses in Springfield, so get them to pledge their support for your bill at home and then remind them of their commitment once you're in Springfield, said Tom Ryder, a lobbyist and speaker who spent 18 years as an Illinois state representative.

"If you make a connection with a legislator back home, when you come to Springfield you're already nine steps ahead," Ryder said.

Whether you're a corporate mover-and-shaker or a stay-at-home mom concerned about arts education in your child's school, lobbying is a three-part process: access, educate and persuade, Ryder said.

"Most folks think persuading is the toughest, but it's easy if you've done the first two well," Ryder explained.

### Be prepared, be focused

Legislators often have two problems: too much information and too little information, Redfield said. So give them concise, organized information they can review quickly and leave the 3-inch binder of research and statistics at home.

“They want enough information to make a decision,” Redfield said. “If you can’t explain it in under a page, you really haven’t thought it through.”

When you meet with them, offer a one-page fact sheet about your legislation, with easy-to-scan bullet points and summaries. If you can’t meet in person, mailing the fact sheet with a one-page personal letter is usually better than emailing it.

Thorough research about the issue and legislators’ backgrounds enables you to field questions, but also helps you frame your argument most effectively with various legislators, Redfield said.

For example, if you are advocating for increased funding for green home construction, one legislator may respond to the cost-effectiveness of your initiative while another may be more interested in its environmental impact.

Redfield also said you should remain open to angles of your legislation you haven’t thought about. Teaming up with larger organizations or residents of other districts adds more oomph to your cause when you present it.

“The more you know the issue, the more you will see the connections that will allow you to build coalitions,” he said.

Citizens bring a new dimension to legislation by putting a human face on the issue, but legislators also need to see the statewide policy impact, Redfield said.

“Ultimately, there has to be a public-policy argument,” he explained. “It’s about relationships. It’s about power. It’s about coalitions. But there also has to be a basic public-policy reason why this bill makes the world a better place.”

### **Maximize your time at the Capitol**

After laying the groundwork on the district level, head to the Capitol as legislators get closer to voting on your bill.

Lobbyists generally agree Wednesday is the best day to go to Springfield, because legislators are more likely to be there instead of traveling to and from their districts. But Ryder cautions that most groups know that, so there are likely to be more people vying for attention.

Before you go, you can check the schedule to find out if it is a committee day, when legislators will be in and out of meetings, or a floor session day, when they will be voting on the General Assembly floor. You’re more likely to get their undivided attention if you meet in their offices, as opposed to pulling them off the floor, so Ryder recommended going on committee days.

Every two years, the University of Illinois publishes the “Almanac of Illinois Politics,” which contains detailed information on each legislator as well as how he or she voted on key pieces of legislation, which can serve as a barometer for a legislator’s voting tendencies, Ryder said.

Be strategic when choosing which legislators to meet with in Springfield, Redfield said. Check the General Assembly Web site to see who sits on the committees related to your bill, who sponsors your bill and what bills other legislators have sponsored. Target legislators who are on the fence and may be receptive to your pitch instead of wasting time trying to convert those who are staunchly opposed or only visiting those who already support you, he said.

The Internet has made Illinois’ legislative process more transparent, and residents can now research legislators and track the process of bills with the click of a mouse, Redfield said.

“There are things there to empower people if they know how to take advantage of them,” he said.

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