

Communicating with Elected Officials

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Communicating with elected officials is a key component of any advocacy endeavor. And just as it is your responsibility as a citizen to exercise your right to vote, it is just as important to communicate with officials once they take office. Let them know your communities' concerns and interests. Stakeholders promoting many different interests are in regular contact with elected officials, and the historic preservation community must be active on this front as well.

Why It Is Necessary to Communicate with Elected Officials

Historic preservation needs the support of elected officials because they determine policies that affect preservation efforts. For example, elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels make decisions on funding measures and grant programs; support tax incentives to encourage historic preservation and community revitalization (federal tax credits, state tax credits, or local property tax abatement programs); and enact legal protections to protect historic buildings and sites.

Regular communication with elected officials will help secure policies that benefit preservation and will establish a relationship with decision makers as partners in successful preservation initiatives. Relationships with elected officials should be seen as a two-way street. By cultivating these relationships, preservationists know they have an ally in a decision-making position, and conversely, preservation advocates can be a helpful resource to public officials by providing updates and information about what is happening "on the ground" with their constituents.

Know Your Decision Makers

It is important to do some research on decision makers before starting to build relationships with them and communicating preservation priorities. Knowing what motivates elected officials can be helpful in advocating for a particular cause. Most state governments as well as individual legislators have websites with information on voting records, personal history of elected officials, cam-



Main Street staff and volunteers in Elkader, Iowa invited Congressman Jim Nussle to help hang their sign announcing Elkader's 2001 Great American Main Street Award. An event like this rewards the elected official for supporting these programs or provides an enjoyable introduction, if the official is new to preservation. Photo courtesy of Elkader Main Street.

paign platforms, and so on. Consider researching the following questions:

- What is the official's background: hometown, school, previous career, outside interests? This helps to identify possible allies who have worked with the official in the past and issues that are important to the official.
- What district does the elected official represent? What historic resources are in this district?
- What committee memberships does the official hold? What is the official's seniority? This will help preservation advocates determine what types of policy the official is actively involved with and the official's relative influence among his or her colleagues.



Award ceremonies provide a great opportunity to publicly highlight the important contributions elected officials have made to historic preservation. Congressman Jim Leach (R-Iowa) received the Main Street Civic Leadership Award in Albuquerque, N.M., for his championship of a provision in the HOPE VI reauthorization to help smaller cities develop affordable housing in downtown upper-floor spaces and peripheral buildings. Photo by Linda Glisson.

- What are the official's positions on the issues that matter to preservation? What is the official's voting record on these matters?
- What other issues does the official support? This information will help link your preservation priorities with the issues that are at the forefront of an elected official's policy agenda.

Effective Communication with Elected Officials

There are many different ways to communicate with elected officials, and the most appropriate depends on each unique situation. In general, communication with elected officials can take place via e-mail, fax, mail, telephone, or face-to-face meetings.

Because personalization to the greatest extent possible is desired, face-to-face meetings are usually preferable, but that doesn't mean that other forms of communication can't be effective. The method you use to communicate is not nearly as important as your message. A thoughtful, personalized, and well-written e-mail, fax, or letter that

explains how a preservation issue will directly impact constituents and/or the elected official's district can have nearly the same effect as a personal visit. Avoid form letters or a formulaic response. Make the message your own and have it reflect your genuine passion for the subject. Regardless of the method, elected officials care most about the concerns of their constituents because they want to get reelected! Communications that hold the most weight with elected officials are from those they represent, so advocates should state clearly in any communications that they are a constituent.

Preservation advocates can build a relationship with elected officials starting with outreach and education programs. From there advocates can advance to specific requests and then—following the hoped-for success—to recognition events. Even if it is necessary to jump in immediately with a request on a specific issue, advocates should continue to follow up with information to strengthen the relationship.

Reach Out

First communicate the importance of preservation to officials and their staff. Elected officials want and expect to hear from constituents and appreciate their efforts. If elected officials don't know priorities, they can't effectively represent their constituents or make informed decisions on issues regarding historic preservation. Remember that decision makers are constantly balancing interests of concerned citizens, so make sure elected officials are familiar with preservation issues. A few ways in which to engage elected officials include:

- providing them with current information through newsletters and announcements (be sure to ask permission before adding to e-mail and mail distribution lists),
- inviting them to speak at or attend meetings, and
- insuring that they are included at preservation events in their district, such as groundbreaking or ribbon-cuttings.

Educate

Next, act as a reliable information resource to elected officials on matters concerning historic preservation. They need to be aware of the many issues that may affect preservation. Although elected officials and their staff tend to have general knowledge on a wide variety of subjects, they rely on experts in the field to guide and educate

them when it comes to the specifics. You should aim to be the “go-to” person for decision makers when they have a question about historic preservation. Some examples of helpful information to provide to your elected officials include:

- background on the history and significance of your community
- general information on state and local preservation organizations
- copies of economic benefit studies and reinvestment statistics
- updates on preservation projects in your community or district

Ask

Once a relationship with elected officials is established and they are familiar with preservation concerns, the next step is to think about specific ways they can advance a preservation agenda. Typical requests would be

to ask officials to support or sponsor legislation that would benefit preservation, to vote a certain way on a measure, to include historic preservation in a legislative platform, or to attend an event. Regardless of the request, make sure you clearly communicate what you want them to do and express why their support would benefit preservation. Use local examples to show how the action you are requesting would affect the official’s state, district, or community.

Recognize

It is important to recognize elected officials when their time or actions have benefited historic preservation. In addition to directly thanking decision makers for their efforts, advocates should take the opportunity to acknowledge their support in a more public way. This can be done at a variety of occasions such as tours, ribbon cuttings, or a press conference. Other options include bestowing an award or honor on the elected official, or by acknowledging decision makers in the press through a

Dos and Don'ts for Communicating with Elected Officials

DO:

Conduct your research ahead of time

Mention you are a constituent

Make clear, concise arguments

Provide relevant examples

Be polite, address officials properly

Make a specific request

Be aware of the official’s interests and priorities

Include your contact information

Leave room for follow-up

Say thank you

DON'T:

Give false or misconstrued information

Focus on too many priorities

Be overly wordy or go into too much detail

Be intimidated

Threaten or be demanding

Expect an immediate response

Be disappointed to be referred to legislative staff

Use technical jargon

Forget to recognize them for their support



Advocates use this descriptive one-page Issue Brief in their effort to educate officials about the importance of expanding New York's existing rehabilitation tax credit. Courtesy of Preservation League of New York State.

letter to the editor. In any case, it is important to let elected officials know that the preservation community appreciates their support of historic preservation and can be counted on to publicly recognize them, whenever it is appropriate.

What to Communicate

Whether by e-mail, letter, phone, or face-to-face, a carefully crafted message conveys to decision makers that historic preservation is very important to your community. Be sure all communication is clear, concise, and direct.

Some effective communication strategies include:

- Identify spokespeople who would be effective at communicating your message. This enables a consistent, persuasive message.
- Develop a short (no more than one-page) briefing to summarize the benefits and expected outcomes of key policies. This can be useful for any type of stakeholder: an elected official, a member of the press, a potential volunteer, or a potential funder.

- Prepare case studies showcasing successful preservation projects in an elected official's district complete with pictures.
- Have handy a brief "elevator speech" that summarizes your concerns in case you run into an elected official or stakeholder and have the opportunity for a very brief conversation.
- Distribute letters of support for a specific preservation initiative.

Conclusion

Successful preservation programs, deserving projects, and worthy causes depend on support from elected officials that have the ability to enact policies. Thankfully, every voice matters in our legislative process and effective communication by preservationists will ensure that the preservation message is heard by decision makers. People involved in preservation care deeply about their communities and their states and the special places that enrich all of our lives. That message is a powerful and compelling one so don't hesitate to promote your cause with determination and persistence. Your community and its heritage deserve nothing less!

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Resources and Links

A Blueprint for Lobbying

by Susan West Montgomery
National Trust for Historic Preservation
www.preservationbooks.org

Advocacy Guru

Advocacy Associates, LLC.
www.advocacyguru.com

Effective Communications for Preservation Nonprofit Organizations

by Richard McPherson, Debra Ashmore, and Timothy Oleary
National Trust for Historic Preservation
www.preservationbooks.org

The National Trust Center for State and Local Policy helps preservationists influence policy makers in their own communities through training, technical assistance, and promotion of effective advocacy tools. This publication is part of the Center's *Advocacy Training Manual*. To receive assistance with your policy issue, the latest information on advocacy techniques, or to order additional copies of this chapter, e-mail the National Trust Center for State and Local Policy at policy@nthp.org, call 202-588-6167, or visit www.nationaltrust.org/advocacy. This project is made possible, in part, through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.