

HOW TO LOBBY...

Westfield Evening News column

By State Representative Don Humason, Jr.

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The House of Representatives did not meet in a formal session this week. Despite that, I was in Boston for three days. I had to prepare for my meeting with House Ways and Means Chairman Charles Murphy to lobby on behalf of my district and give him my budget priorities for the Fiscal Year 2011 state budget.

It was a tough meeting. Representative Murphy is clearly feeling the pinch of state revenues not meeting state obligations. I requested holding local aid to cities like Westfield harmless at last year's level. I advocated supporting tourism and library services. I pushed for funding for Early Intervention services for children and for services for the deaf and hard of hearing. Finally, I spoke to the Chairman about rejecting Governor Patrick's budget "outside section 18" that would repeal a sales tax incentive on the sale of aircraft in Massachusetts.

I did my lobbying this week. And I was lobbied by people myself. What follows is a re-run of a helpful and an informative column I wrote called "How to Lobby Like a Professional."

The House of Representatives is slated to debate our version of the state budget in late April. Between now and then, my colleagues and I will be barraged by lobbyists of all sorts.

You don't need to pay expensive lobbyists to deliver your message to representatives. Legislators are people just like you and want to be in contact with their constituents. Never be afraid to communicate with them yourselves. Be polite and informative. Building that relationship now may pay dividends in the future.

1) Call your legislator or make an appointment to see him at his office or during office hours. Face to face contact is the best way to lobby. Have information available, in writing, to give him about the legislation or issue concerning you.

2) Write your legislator. Next to speaking to him in person, personal letters are the most effective way of communicating. Avoid form letters and pre-printed postcards whenever possible. (In other words, don't be a "slactivist.") A hand written or typed letter in your own words shows that you cared about the topic enough to take your valuable time to put it on paper and send it.

* VERY IMPORTANT! Always include your full name, address, and telephone number. Print your full name even if your signature is on the letter. Often, poor handwriting makes it impossible to read whom the letter is from and respond.

3) With email, it is also important you include your name, address, and phone number. I receive hundreds of emails a week and there is no way of knowing if they come from constituents in my district. If senders don't identify themselves or don't give their address I delete the email. A legislator may not always respond via email. He may want to write or call. There have been many times I've wanted to respond personally to an email by calling the sender but they failed to include a phone number.

* Like you, legislators are very busy. Make it as easy to reply to you as possible. Providing all your contact information makes it more likely you will receive a timely response.

There are times when you may not receive that response. During hectic times, like budget or override season, legislators are in the House Chamber and are unable to return calls or reply to correspondence. Be assured that we do get your messages and often take the emails, letters, or call slips with them to the floor.

4) Feel free to speak with a legislator's Legislative Aide. These staff people are skilled, knowledgeable professionals who will treat your call respectfully and confidentially. Many people delay their own satisfaction by waiting to speak directly with the legislator when the aide would have done just fine. Aides report everything to their bosses. It's their job.

5) Invite your legislator to meet with you or your group. Invite him to tour your business or school or get to know your organization so that he has some knowledge and familiarity with you and your cause.

6) If you're coming to the State House to lobby your legislator, call him first to see if he'll be there. He may have events in his district that day. You will pass each other on the Mass Pike going in opposite directions. Save yourself the cost of the trip to Boston and meet him back at home.

7) Don't forget to thank your legislator! Send a thank you note. Remember him at election time with your vote. Send a small donation. Put up a lawn sign. Campaigning and politics is part of his job. If your legislator was helpful and responsive, be sure to show your appreciation. Support those who support you or your issue.

People are often moved to contact their state legislator. That is a good thing and vitally important because, speaking as a State Representative, it is impossible for us to represent our constituents if we don't know how they think or feel about issues. We need to hear from you to do our job.

Thank you.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not the staff, editor, or publisher of the Westfield Evening News.

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