



# How to Influence Public Decisions

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University

## Sue E. Williams

Family Policy and Energy Specialist

## Larry Sanders

Policy and Public Affairs Specialist

In recent years, local, state and federal governments have become increasingly involved in addressing issues related to farm, food, family, and the environment. Public decisions related to these issues often have an immediate and direct impact on individuals. As a result, citizens have felt an increasing need to make their views known to public decision makers. By doing so, they are exercising their rights and responsibilities as United States citizens.

Daniel Yankelovich, President of the Public Agenda Foundation, suggests that to make democracy work, the people must be actively involved in making public judgments. In short, he suggests that to preserve American democracy there is something for everyone to do—average citizens, institutions, people in positions of leadership, experts, government officials, the media—all of us. Involvement of a wide range of individuals and groups is the way things get done in a democracy.

You can become involved in public policy in a variety of roles. For example, you can choose to be an impartial observer—choosing to do nothing. In this role, you must accept what others have decided. Some people choose to be public policy educators. In the education role, you first define the problem. Next, you identify alternative solutions and the consequences of these solutions. As an educator, you present this information to interested people and allow them to make a decision regarding the public issue. Another important role in the public policy process is the role of an advocate. In this role, you study the issue and take a stand. You try to convince key decision makers to make your opinion the policy or law. You usually work with others of the same opinion to get this done. It is important to note that you cannot be an educator and advocate on the same issue. You

must make a conscious decision regarding the role you will or can take on a given issue. Unfortunately, too many people do nothing, letting others exercise influence and make decisions for them.

This publication provides some guidelines for the “average citizen” to assist in influencing public decisions as an advocate. Your impact on public policy is increased or limited by your degree of knowledge, imagination, action, and resources.

Taking the role of citizen activist and advocate will require effective communication with people with similar interests to yours and with key decision makers. You may want to influence local officials, state legislators or even members of the U.S. Congress. To be effective, you must be systematic and organized in your communication efforts.

## Study the Issue

An issue is a topic of public concern on which you can act. It is a subject of fairly widespread public interest. To successfully influence public decisions, you must first carefully study the issue. If you are not familiar with the issue, you can be discredited and ignored. Be aware of recent studies, reports and media releases related to the issue being considered. Studying the issue involves four steps:

1. Define the problem, its history, and its impact on individuals and families. Clarify your interest and the interests of other concerned people.
2. Explore the policy choices with other people. Identify supporters and opponents, including why they feel as they do about the issue.
3. Examine the probable consequences of each choice: who will be affected; how they will be affected; how much will it cost?
4. Develop a course of action agreeable to many. Identify organizations and groups that can help.

Here are some questions you should be prepared to answer regarding the issue:

What is the problem?

Why is the problem of concern?

Can you document the impacts?

Does the issue arouse strong emotions or challenge deeply held values of large numbers of people?

Who makes the decisions regarding the policy?

What is the history of the issue?

What are the various solutions that have been proposed before?

What are the likely consequences of these alternative solutions?

What are the traditional arguments of supporters and opponents?

Which policymakers support and oppose the previous proposals?

Have the major political parties taken a position?

After you have studied the issue and feel comfortable with the facts and your position regarding the issue, develop a strategy for making your views known to public decision makers and the affected public.

## Effective Lobbying

When you decide to make your views known to key decision makers, this will involve contacting (lobbying) a public official. Here are some suggestions to assist in making your lobbying effort successful.

**1. Know your subject.** Know your subject well enough to feel comfortable with it, but do not be embarrassed to admit you may not know the answer to a specific question. Offer to find the information and forward it.

**2. Be honest.** Be straightforward in presenting your view. Do not imply facts or authority which you do not possess. If your credibility is ever questioned, you will not regain it. Long-term credibility is more valuable than short-term gain; it helps you win the war even though you may lose the first few battles.

**3. Be interested.** Know something about the public official you are lobbying. Familiarize yourself with his or her special interest; meet the staff; stop in frequently; ask to be placed on the constituent newsletter mailing list. If the individual is a legislator, what kinds of legislation has he or she authored?

**4. Be constructive.** Rather than just condemning a proposal or current policy, show specifically how it can be improved. Demonstrate a willingness to compromise if compromise can be found and take positive, as well as negative, stands on issues.

**5. Be alert and imaginative.** Sell your position or proposal through surveys or programs which catch the public eye. If you favor a measure, seek a means of dramatically promoting public interest and support. Watch for opportunities to pursue your proposal in other ways, perhaps through an amendment or resolution, and watch for amendments or resolutions which affect you.

**6. Be cooperative.** Coordinate your lobbying activities with other groups or organizations which may share your interest in a given issue. This includes organizations which might be expected to oppose, as well as support, your position. Keep abreast of public action and legislation in other states, as well as national legislative studies affecting your issue.

**7. Provide information.** Give the official fact sheets, background studies, position papers and similar research which tells how a proposal affects their constituency. Keep it brief! If the official wants more, you will be contacted.

**8. Work as a team.** Take someone with you if you feel at all uncomfortable when meeting with a public official. Remember, unless this is a priority issue with the official, you will know far more about it than the public official. Provide information without making the receiver feel dumb—egos can become inflated among people who have won elections!

**9. Be professional.** Do not threaten a public official if he or she disagrees with you. By the same token, never hint at rewards for support. Never get angry and never try to get even.

**10. Avoid standardization.** Personalize your message. Send original letters in your own words rather than form letters or copies of letters from groups or associations.

**11. You can't win 'em all.** There will be disappointments, but often you can win the second or third time around.

**12. Remember to say “thank you.”** After an issue has been resolved, send a note of appreciation to officials you worked with acknowledging their time and effort on your behalf.

The first rule of effective lobbying is to know who represents you at every level of government, from the White House to the School Board and City Council. The fact is that unless the official you plan to lobby is aware that you live in an area that he or she represents, you will have little effect on their opinions. This is not a liability, but an asset, for it cuts down the time and expense needed to get your views known where it will do the most good. Retired Oklahoma Senator Helen Cole said, “My constituents can change my vote, if not my opinion, on any issue if enough of them contact me. When a wise politician feels the heat, they will see the light.”

## Letters

Letters can be effective in making your views known to public officials. Written contact, along with personal visits and phone calls, can be very powerful.

Be sincere when you write. Express yourself in your own words. Do not copy word for word or use a form letter. Form letters get less priority than personal letters. Letters from outside the home district are given less attention than from constituents. So if possible, arrange to have a person living in that district write or make contact.

Cover only a single issue in each letter, preferably one that is current, with public action or legislation pending. Be brief, but make your point.

## Phone Calls

Telephone calls can be a good way to communicate views on policy issues. However, they should not replace a written message. Telephone calls do not provide a record of what was said.

It is not necessary to speak directly to the public official unless you are personally acquainted. The staff members in his or her office are capable and can convey your feelings and message to the person you want to reach.

## Telegrams, Mailgrams or FAX

If your message is urgent, use a telegram, mailgram or a facsimile message (FAX) to communicate your views on important issues quickly. The cost is justified if a regular letter would reach the official too late for a key vote or decision.

FAX machines are one of the latest communication tools for rapid transmission of messages. You will need to know the FAX phone number for

the office you are sending a message and have access to a machine to send your message. Many copy shops and other businesses have FAX machines. The cost is only slightly more than a long distance phone call and your message is printed out to document your message.

Again, keep messages short and focused on a single issue.

## Giving Testimony

Sometimes because of your knowledge on a particular subject or because you represent a group that holds an important point of view, you may be called upon to testify before a legislative committee, a local government board, a regulatory commission or some other policy unit. The goal of testimony is to persuade certain public decision makers that your point of view is current and worthy of consideration.

There is no great mystery to testifying. Here are some suggestions for preparing and delivering testimony at a public hearing.

- Testify, even if your testimony is brief. Building a strong record of support is vital, and every testimony helps. It is better to have a large number of short presentations than only one or two long, professionally prepared comments. Remember, most public decisions are political and public support is crucial in getting a good decision.
- Record the hearing for future reference.
- Listen objectively and take notes on arguments and evidence presented during the hearing.
- Begin your testimony with a clear statement of purpose.
- Show how your viewpoint will be of benefit to the public interest.
- Back up your ideas and statements with short examples.
- Be positive. Avoid using words such as “maybe” and “could.”
- Do not “ad lib” more comments than necessary.
- Watch for reactions from the hearing body and adjust comments accordingly.
- Maintain eye contact with the decision makers and audience.

- Don't put people to sleep with long dull testimony—be clear and to the point.
- Stay within time limits.
- Provide a written copy of comments.
- Thank the hearing body for listening to your testimony.
- Talk to other attendees after the hearing.
- Check with media people, if possible, to make sure there are no misquotes.

Know what happens after the hearing. Be sure to be aware of the rules, procedures and deadlines to add to the hearing record or to file an appeal of a decision. If a decision is not made at the hearing, find out when one will be made, how it will be made and where the decision-making meeting will be held. Ask for specific time, date, and place. Then plan to attend.

Chances are, your well-thought-through efforts will be rewarded. If not, don't give up on the hearing process. Most public figures will tell you that the primary ingredient for success is tenacity. Stay in there!

## Oklahoma Legislative Information

**General information.** At the Oklahoma State Capitol, an information desk is located on the fourth floor at the entrance to the House and Senate Chambers. Clerks at the desks have daily calendars, maps and information on committee meetings and hearings. They can direct you to the rooms in which the meetings or hearings are held.

**Copies of bills.** Copies of both Senate and House bills are available in the Senate post office, room 310, the State Capitol. Phone 405-524-0126, ext. 514.

**Status of bills.** Contact the House record clerk, room 405 of the State Capitol, phone 405-521-2711 ext. 109. This office indexes subject matter of all House and Senate measures and keeps bill status cards. This information is avail-

able to members and to the public. Call this office for information concerning location and status of bills and resolutions. Beginning with the 1991 session, bill status is computerized.

**Senate records and information.** State Capitol, room 534, phone 405-521-5642. Status of bills may be found here on a computer. This is the Senate records area.

For information on bills after 5 p.m., call the Capitol Straight Line, 405-521-1602 or 1-800-522-8556.

For copies of enrolled bills and signed acts, contact Secretary of State, State Capitol, room 101, phone 405-521-3911.

The Capitol Hot Line number is 405-521-1602 or toll free 1-800-522-8556. Using the hot line, constituents can send messages to legislators or staff through inter-agency mail. You can find out if a committee meeting or hearing is scheduled that day. To contact members of the House of Representatives or to leave a message, call 1-800-522-8502.

## Summary

Anyone who can make a phone call or write a letter can lobby. If you believe in some cause, great or small, and this would be a better world if your cause were advanced, then by all means you should lobby.

## References

- Cole, H. (1987). "The first rule of effective lobbying." Personal notes.
- Family Community Leadership (1986). Problem solving and public policy process, *Family Community Leadership Resource Pack*. Corvallis, Oregon: Western Rural Development Center.
- Guither, H.D., Edelman, M.A., and Yoho, C.B. (1991). *Making your views count on public policy issues*. North Central Region Extension Publication 389.
- Lamar, C. and McLaughlin, J. (Ed.). (1991) *Guide to effective citizen lobbying*. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: League of Women Voters of Oklahoma.
- Larason, L. (1991). "Tips for lobbying your legislator." Legislative Day Handout.