

# A Dozen Golden Rules for Grassroots Involvement

Naturally, the League staff can't carry out all legislative activities alone. For example, personal and continuous contact with 181 senators and representatives is a practical impossibility.

Also, and more importantly, legislators are most interested in the opinions of their constituents back home. Therefore, the most effective legislative communications come from the mayors, councilmembers, and other city officials to whom the legislator is locally accountable.

Teamwork, with emphasis on grassroots lobbying by municipal officials, will once again produce a successful session for Texas cities.

The following suggestions can be useful in ensuring that your city's views are heard—and listened to—in the months ahead.

## 1. Stay Well-Informed

The League's *Legislative Update* is the primary means through which the League communicates legislative information to its member cities. Virtually every Thursday afternoon during each regular session and at least once a month when the legislature is not in session, the *Legislative Update* is placed on the TML Web site, [www.tml.org](http://www.tml.org). In addition, one copy is mailed to each member city. The *Legislative Update* highlights important, city-related bills as they move through the legislative process. It also serves as a vehicle for requesting action from your city, such as occasional requests for comments regarding a particular bill's impact on your city or requests for letters or phone calls of support or opposition. Occasionally, Legislative Alerts are issued for special purposes.

## 2. Put Someone in Charge

Make sure one staff person is responsible for immediate review of the *Legislative Update* and any Legislative Alerts, and for initiating a timely response by your city.

This person may be the mayor, the city manager, an assistant city manager, an assistant to the city manager, or someone else. This person should duplicate the *Legislative Update*

Whenever the Texas Legislature is in session, the Texas Municipal League staff must: (1) advocate the cities' interests directly with senators, representatives, and other state officials; and (2) keep municipal officials informed of—and involved in—city-related developments at the Capitol.

for distribution to councilmembers and department heads and should coordinate follow-up. During the busiest periods of the legislative session, a response from your city may be needed very quickly, so it is important that someone have the responsibility for coordinating your city's response.

## 3. Get Personally Acquainted

Make it your business to become personally acquainted with your senator and representative. Take a sincere interest in them, and get to know their political philosophy.

If you contact your legislators only when you want their support on a legislative

matter, it might be too late. It's better to be in touch with them throughout their terms of office.

## 4. Know Your Legislator's Staff

It's also helpful to get to know your legislator's staff. Frequently, you may need to call the legislator to impress upon him or her your city's concerns. If you cannot talk directly to your legislator, a call to a Capitol office staffer, whom you know and who knows you, is the next best thing. Be sure to get acquainted with district staff members as well.

## 5. Respond to the League's Requests for Assistance

The *Legislative Update* or a Legislative Alert will frequently ask for your assistance in analyzing the effects of a bill or in communicating with legislators. Please respond in a timely manner to League requests for bill reviews and letters, phone calls, or faxes in support or opposition. Keep track of your positions and responses. Make sure that TML receives a copy of any letter that you write in response to a League request.

Remember that the League's position on a specific piece of legislation may change as the bill is amended. Consequently, it is vital that you continue to respond immediately to requests for letters, even though you may have already written a letter at an earlier point in the process.



## 6. Be Able to Act Quickly

Establish a procedure for urgent (one-day) action on bills.

Occasionally, a new bill is introduced or an important amendment is proposed that requires immediate response by cities. The League will request that you take immediate action, or the League staff may call city officials in cities in key legislative districts and ask them to call their legislators right away. You'll need a quick and simple method to get that call made.

## 7. Express Yourself

Surprisingly few people ever contact their legislators. This reluctance usually results from the belief that legislators have no time or inclination to answer their phones or read their mail, and that one single contact won't make any difference anyway.

In most cases, these views are wrong. Thoughtful, factually persuasive contacts can change legislators' minds and cause them to review their judgments.

Although a telephone call or a letter can be very effective, personal face-to-face contact is the most effective approach.

Try to talk to your legislators when they are back home in the districts; they are more likely to listen and respond positively in a local environment. Also, when you are in Austin, don't miss the opportunity to drop by and talk to your senator and representative.

While members of the legislature are extremely busy, it should not be assumed that they won't have time to see you. After all, they are there to represent your interests and views.

Your senator and representative need to be directly exposed to people they represent—including you. They need to know what you think about the issues facing your city and how legislation pending in Austin will affect you. That's what they're in the legislature for.

Be sure to have accurate facts and good arguments about any issues you discuss with your legislators. Make sure you understand the particular bill in question.

## 8. Write Letters Carefully and Thoughtfully

Each letter you write should address only one bill and should reference the bill number in a separate line at the top of the page. Otherwise, your letter may get lost in the system.

Legislators are often caught in a crossfire between conflicting interests and opinions. Consequently, their votes may be contrary to your opinion as a municipal official. Present your position logically and base it on facts. Emotional appeals do not influence a vote.

Don't send just a council resolution. You may want to refer in your letter to a resolution, but don't just send the resolution itself.

Identify the bill you are writing about. Give the number of the bill and a brief description of its subject matter. Thousands of bills are introduced during a regular session, and legislators cannot be expected to immediately recall every one of them merely by a number or a vague description.

Be brief, specific, and to-the-point. Many issues are complex, but your opinions and arguments have a better chance of being read if they are stated as concisely as the subject will permit. Remember that your letter will be competing for time and attention with countless others. Most viewpoints can be set forth in a carefully written, one-page letter.

Use background material provided by TML as a basis for your own letters, but don't simply copy the language. Give facts and opinions concerning the effects of a particular measure on your own city.

The importance of contacting a legislator on time cannot be overemphasized. The most eloquent letter does no good if it arrives after a vote.

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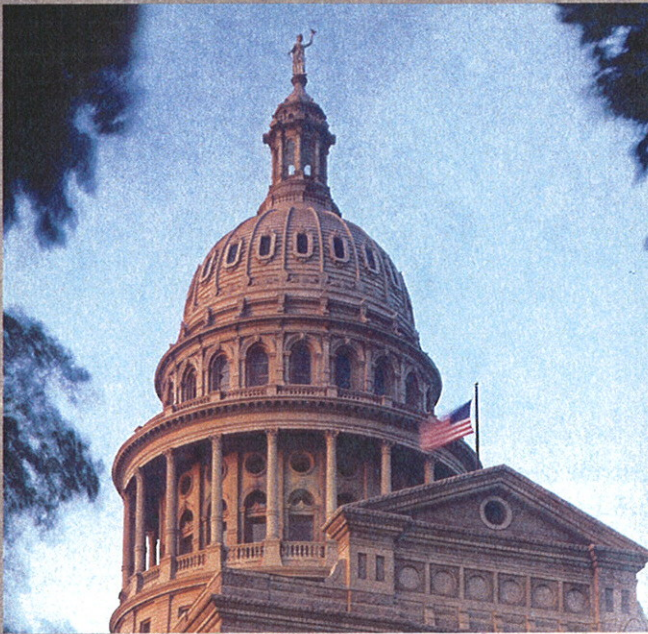
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### 9. Keep the League Staff Informed

Always send copies of your letters, faxes, or e-mails to the League. The staff needs to know to whom you write, when you write, and what you say. And if you receive a response from a legislator, let us know about that, too. The League's legislative staff reads your letters and incorporates your arguments and local circumstances into League testimony. The staff members also cite your letters when they talk with your legislators.

### 10. Recognize Their Problems

Your legislators represent all the constituents in your area—liberal and conservative, business and labor. Their duty is to represent all the people to the best of their ability.

There may be times when you think your legislators are on the wrong track, but they may have facts that are not available to you. Try to understand their problems, outlook, and objectives.

Never threaten political or other consequences if the senator or representative refuses to see an issue your way. Few respond positively to blatant power plays.

Most controversial legislation is the result of compromise—that's the way the system operates. There will be times when legislation does not go your way, so don't be too critical when it happens. Remember that you can disagree without being disagreeable.

Be very wary of public criticism of your legislator's actions. Some legislators rarely vote with cities, yet come through on crucial votes. Taking them to task in a public forum for a series of votes on relatively unimportant issues

can lose their votes permanently on much more vital issues. It's much more effective to sit down with a legislator in private to discuss areas of disagreement.

### 11. Say Thanks

Remember to thank legislators regularly and publicly for their work, support, and votes.

Never discount the importance of a thank you; it really can make a difference. This is one of the most important things you can do, because so few people remember to thank their legislators—and legislators clearly remember those who do. Recognition dinners and letters to the editor praising the responsiveness of legislators to local needs can be effective public ways of saying thank you to your legislator.

If you believe your legislators deserve re-election, don't hesitate to get involved when they are campaigning for another term. That's the time they need your help most of all.

### 12. Do Unto Others...

Approach legislators the way you, as a city official, want to be approached by your constituents—with courtesy and respect. ★



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