

Making Policy Work for You: **Tips for Meeting with Your Elected Officials**

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From planning and zoning regulations to economic development initiatives, policy can affect your work in community gardening. Since policy can influence you, you want to be able to influence policy. This requires meeting with your elected officials and their staff to tell them about the issues that are important to you and your organizations.

Before the Meeting

- Call ahead to schedule your meeting. Be sure to mention you are a constituent and why you want the meeting. You may need to speak with a scheduler. If you want to meet with a federal official but cannot travel far, find out when the official will be back in your area, or schedule a meeting with a staff person in the local office.
- Don't be disappointed if you get a meeting with a staff person instead of the legislator--staff people often write legislation!
- Plan who will come to the meeting. Keep the group small but representative, no more than 3-4 people.
- Plan what points each of you will cover in order to utilize your meeting time most effectively. As you plan your points, consider the following:
 - Have statistics, but make them personal. Your legislator will want to know how your issue affects his/her constituents.
 - Have a very specific "ask" that you want to the legislator to do (i.e. co-sponsor a piece of legislation).
 - Be prepared to thank the legislator if he/she has supported your issue in the past.
- Prepare materials to bring: photos of your program, media regarding your issue, background information you may not be able to cover in the meeting, and always your contact information.
- Dress for success. You want to make a good first impression.
- Allow plenty of time to get there, and allow more time for the meeting than it should actually last. Schedules often change, requiring you to wait for a brief time when you arrive.

During the Meeting

- Introduce yourself and your organization. Remind whomever you meet with that you are a constituent.
- Be succinct, and be clear about your ask.
- Answer the staff person or legislator's questions as thoroughly as you can, but don't be afraid to say "I don't know" and offer to follow-up with the answer after the meeting.
- Take notes of follow-up items and reactions the staff person or legislator has. If you're meeting with a staff person who can't commit to your ask, set a deadline as to when you will receive an answer (i.e. "Can I call you next week to find out if Sen. Jones will co-sponsor the bill?")
- Obtain a card from whomever you meet with so that you may contact that person again directly.

After the Meeting

- Debrief. Talk over your impressions, and decide who will make follow-up contact.
- Write a thank-you note. Include in your thank-you note an overview of main points of the meeting, and answer any questions you were unable to answer in the meeting.¹
- If your meeting is part of a larger campaign, contact the organizer to let him/her know how your meeting went.

¹ Though hand-written notes are appropriate for most situations, snail mail that comes to legislators in DC is often delayed and sometimes damaged due to security measures. Either hand-deliver a note, or send an e-mail.