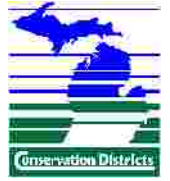


The background of the slide is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the American flag. The red and white stripes are prominent, flowing diagonally across the frame. The blue field with white stars is visible in the upper left corner.

Building Legislative Relationships

Training Module 10



What You'll Learn In This Module

- | Why it is essential to maintain good legislative relationships.
- | Why positive messages are key when communicating with legislators.
- | What are the elements of an effective letter or email message when writing to legislators.



Discussion Questions

- | What does it mean to “be positive” when dealing with legislators?
- | Why is credibility so important when dealing with legislators?
- | How would you write a good letter to a legislator?



Influencing the Legislative Process

Conservation Districts are directly affected by actions of Federal, state, and local legislators. Sometimes there is a need for new legislation to handle a natural resource issues; sometimes the issue concerns state funding for District and natural resource programs.

Elected officials react to what they read, hear, and with whom they speak. In order to influence the legislative process, it is necessary to take action to educate, inform, and persuade.



Influencing the Legislative Process (continued)

To build effective legislative relationships, Conservation District members, especially District directors should:

- | Be informed of issues affecting their District and its goals.
- | Know their elected representatives and other legislators who influence Conservation District funding and policy.
- | Be prepared to present the case for Conservation District interests effectively.



Be Positive With Your Message

To be effective in influencing legislators, positive thinking and acting are very important. Communicating a positive attitude will open doors and keep them open.

You and the legislators you deal with should:

- Know that your issue or concern is always an affirmative one; for example, you should consider yourself “pro” and not “anti.”
- Realize that in order for you to “win” on your issue, no one should have to “lose” their argument or issue. Look for the “win-win: solution.
- Remember that there is always a desirable solution to your problem.



Personal Contacts

1. Before contacting a legislator, take the time to read all available background material on the bill or issue which concerns you, so you are knowledgeable about the topic.
2. Know when and where to contact a legislator. The best time to find a state or federal legislator at the Capitol (Lansing or Washington D.C.) are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.



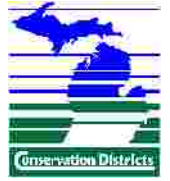
Personal Contacts (continued)

3. Occasionally, legislators will be able to see you if you simply walk into their office, but the best approach is to call ahead and make an appointment. Let the legislator know what you wish to discuss. If you cannot get an appointment, do not hesitate to go to the office. You may at least be able to talk to an aide, and you will have made them aware of your concern.
4. When you introduce yourself, save time by making it clear who you are and what Conservation District you are with.



Personal Contacts (continued)

5. Do not “overkill.” Most legislators have many demands on their time. An elaborate sales job or long, emotional speech will not be appreciated. They do, however, want your well-prepared facts and views, presented in a straightforward manner. If possible, leave a copy of your position or a fact sheet with them to read over at a later time.
6. Don’t demand a commitment before the facts are in. Give your legislator a chance to examine all sides of an issue.



Be a Credible Spokesperson

To be effective with legislators, you have to be a credible spokesperson for your issue.

Credibility is easily lost and rarely restored without years of hard work.



Be a Credible Spokesperson (continued)

To establish and maintain credibility, remember the following:

1. You don't have to be disagreeable to disagree
2. Follow the Golden Rule: treat everyone the way you would like to be treated. Use this rule with legislators, staff members, pages, and janitors; you never know who can help (or hurt) you cause.
3. Be true to your convictions:
 - I Be honest
 - I Keep your word
4. Listen, listen, listen. Especially with new legislators.
5. Be positive.



Letter Writing & E-Mail

A personal letter or email message may be the most effective way of contacting your legislator, whether in Lansing or Washington.

If you are new at this type of letter writing, here are some suggestions on how your letters can be most effective:



Letter Writing & E-Mail (continued)

1. Address it properly. Know your legislator's full name and correct spelling. Examples:

For a State Senator

The Honorable (full name)

State Senator

State Capitol

P.O. Box 30036

Lansing, MI 48909-7536

Dear Senator (last name):

For a State Representative

The Honorable (full name)

State Representative

State Capitol

P.O. Box 30014

Lansing, MI 48909-7514

Dear Representative (last name):



Letter Writing & E-Mail (continued)

For a U.S. Senator

The Honorable (full name)

United States Senator

Address

Dear Senator (last name):

For a U.S. Representative

The Honorable (full name)

United States Representative

Address

Dear Congressman/woman (last name):



Letter Writing & E-Mail (continued)

2. Always include your last name and address on the letter itself.
3. Use your own words. Avoid form letters and petitions.
4. Time the arrival of your letter. Write to your legislator while the bill or issue is still in committee and there is still time for effective action.
5. Know what you're writing about. Identify the bill or issue of concern to you.



Letter Writing & E-Mail (continued)

6. Be reasonably brief. A single page, presenting your facts and opinions is preferred by most legislators.
7. Give reasons for your position. Explain how the issue would affect you, your Conservation District and the local community. If you have specialized knowledge, share it with your legislator.
8. Be constructive. If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, explain what you believe to be the right approach.



Letter Writing & E-Mail (continued)

9. Write a letter of appreciation when you feel a legislator has done a good job. Legislators are human too and seldom receive “thank you” letters of encouragement.

Remember, on any one issue, even a few letters to one legislator can have an important impact.



Summary

- | Conservation Districts are directly affected by the actions of legislators. To promote and protect Conservation District interests, informed members and District leaders should educate, inform, and persuade legislators.
- | Positive thinking and acting are essential in working with legislators. People will listen when you are confident, your issues are positive, and your goals can be “won” without anyone else having to “lose” on their issue.



Summary

- | The best plans and the hardest work can be killed in an instant by losing credibility. Remember to disagree without being disagreeable, follow the Golden Rule, be true to your convictions, listen, and be positive.
- | Writing letters to legislators is an effective communication tool. Be concise, specific, and positive. Type or neatly handwrite your own words.



Resources Available

Resource Available	Where to Find It
How A Bill Becomes A Law	Click here to view this document.
A Citizen's Guide To State Government 2003	www.michigan.gov