

# Librarians and Lobbying

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The North Carolina Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services brought together an impressive group of dedicated, capable, and enthusiastic professional and lay delegates. Policy recommendations resulted from the Conference that were designed to ensure that basic library and information services were adequate to meet the needs of all local communities in North Carolina. Inevitably this involved the necessity of seeking funds and mandates from the North Carolina General Assembly as well as maintaining the support of the Governor on specific issues. This led me to wonder how effective librarians would be in lobbying efforts, a crucial question, if the policy and program recommendations were to be implemented.

In the weeks following the Conference, a series of events provided an opportunity to learn from first-hand experience that public librarians, in addition to performing their professional duties at the local, regional, and state levels, do have an effective communications network to marshal strong forces to support positive action relating to public librarians and public libraries. The issues, in this particular case, related to continuing the practice begun in the 1930's of certifying public librarians in North Carolina and also of continuing the existence of an independent Commission established by statute to certify public librarians in this state. That both certification and the independent Commission would continue were by no means certain. In the end, however, House Bill 1315, sponsored by Representative Mary P. Seymour, Chairman of the House Public Libraries Committee, did pass. Those responsible for the passage of the bill learned some valuable lessons from the experience that may be useful to review as the need to be an effective lobbyist grows in importance with each successive session of the General Assembly, or the Congress.

First, it is important to know your representatives in the General Assembly, both House and Senate. Moreover, be sure that the representatives know who you are. Write to congratulate them on election from your district. Watch their vote on issues that interest you, and write to show your support. Call on them in their offices. Attend events designed to introduce legislators or to honor them. Establish a face-to-face relationship. When the time comes to lobby for a bill, you will already have established a good informal relationship.

Second, librarians must be alert and be ready to be alerted. The legislator who knows a key librarian well and who will let him or her know about favorable or unfavorable committee response to an issue or about possible legislation that may affect libraries can be the crucial link in the process of initiating lobbying efforts. Acting quickly can make the difference between success or failure.

Third, it is important to have a formal or informal communications network. With this network, when the librarian needs to secure support for a

bill, he or she can make a few key phone calls and can be assured that these vital contacts will act speedily and effectively in spreading information and in contacting others interested in public libraries. Library trustees are influential, and their support can be significant in bringing creative pressure to bear upon legislators.

Fourth, librarians need to know the details of the legislative process. It is important to follow the proposed legislation through committees, know where the bill is, and when action may be taken. This means that the librarian should be aware of ways to initiate legislation, be willing and prepared to appear before a committee hearing with a carefully written statement, write letters in support or opposition of legislation, and make personal calls. In appearing before a committee hearing, the librarian should clearly identify himself or herself by name and professional position and state at the outset whether he or she is speaking in support or opposition of the bill in question. This can be exciting and fulfilling. It sharpens the wits and renews one's dedication to a cause.

Fifth, be knowledgeable. Without exception, legislators express a lack of patience with lobbyists who take their time and do not present their case well, precisely, and intelligently. Librarians by nature and training seem to have an advantage here. Be sincere. Do not try to intimidate. Be pleasant. Remember, a sense of humor is always helpful. Be consistent, and be firm.

Sixth, in addition, librarians should ascertain and circulate the names of the members of the key committees concerned with legislation pertaining to libraries both in the House and the Senate. If legislation has been initiated, it is important to know the number of the bill and refer to it with a brief title to identify it. Legislators will be responsive to their own constituents. This means that librarians should contact their own representatives from their district who serve on these committees.

Seventh, the lobbyist must not only write and speak effectively, but also listen carefully to suggestions of legislators as to effective strategy, what needs to be done next, where the gaps in support are, what types of phone calls would be most effective at each stage, and who needs to act when. Keep lines of communication open between legislators and between members of the network. It may be worthwhile for the person who is an unpaid volunteer to make it clear that he or she is acting as a concerned citizen.

Eighth, persistence is vital. In the early stages of lobbying, the chairman of a committee may indicate that he has little influence and will not vote on the issue unless there is a tie. Once you win his confidence and support, the chairman may tell the lobbyist that he will not bring the bill up for a vote until he is reasonably sure that it will receive the report the lobbyist desires. A legislator may say that he initiated the legislation that in general would lead him in principle not to support the bill the lobbyist supports, but he may later say that he has checked back into the facts of the background of this particular bill and suggest the procedures that would lead him to change his stand. The lobbyist may be told that a key government official needs to take a position publicly when the official has felt it more appropriate to be neutral or silent. When the necessity of taking a public position at a crucial stage becomes clear and lobbying efforts appear to have created momentum and effective support,

however, the official may choose to make a vitally important telephone call or make a public statement. Those who proposed or reported unfavorably may then have an appropriate way of changing their positions and join happily in support because the picture has changed and the original situation may be seen in a different light. All this happens because lobbyists on the spot have been pounding the unyielding floors of the Legislative Building, alert to what is happening and listening carefully to suggestions and acting quickly, while encouraging a steady flow of letters and telephone calls from influential constituents.

Ninth, lobbyists should remember that their efforts are effective because legislators prove to be flexible, open-minded, and adaptable. Librarians as informed citizens should choose carefully candidates for whom they vote, and they should support bond and other issues that would benefit libraries in North Carolina.

Tenth, and finally, it is important to express appreciation as individuals and as a group to those legislators and supporters whose interest led to the passage of a bill. I remember thinking that if I had had time to take handwritten notes around to legislators' offices before the passage of the bill, I also could find the time the day and the day after the bill passed to take handwritten notes of appreciation around and deliver them personally.

Librarians who lobby may well find the effort exciting and rewarding. Policy recommendations resulting from the Governor's Conference on Library and Information Services need the support of librarians and lay leaders willing to lobby in support of the services so vital to the people of North Carolina.

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