ADVOCACY TOOLKIT:
Communicating with Elected Officials

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The National Trust for Historic Preservation and Main Street America advocate for effective policies for historic preservation and community revitalization through training, technical assistance, and promotion of effective advocacy tools. The Advocacy Toolkit, including this chapter, was initially published through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. To connect with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, visit savingplaces.org or email forum@savingplaces.org. To connect with Main Street America, visit mainstreet.org or email mainstreet@savingplaces.org.
Introduction

Communicating with elected officials is a key component of any advocacy endeavor. Just as it is your responsibility as a citizen to exercise your right to vote, it is just as important to communicate regularly with officials once they take office. Let them know your communities’ concerns and interests. Stakeholders promoting many different interests are in regular contact with elected officials, and the downtown revitalization and historic preservation community must be continuously active on this front as well.

Why It Is Necessary to Communicate with Elected Officials

Main Street and historic preservation need the support of elected officials because they determine policies that affect the economic vitality, diversity, and resiliency of our communities. For example, elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels make decisions on funding measures and grant programs (e.g. funding of state-wide Main Street programs); support incentives to encourage building reuse and community revitalization (e.g., federal and state historic tax credits); and enact legal protections to protect historic buildings and sites.

Regular communication with elected officials will help secure policies that benefit revitalization and will establish a relationship with decision makers as partners. Relationships with elected officials are a two-way street. By cultivating these relationships, you gain an ally in a decision-making position, and conversely, your advocacy efforts provide updates and information about what is happening “on the ground” with their constituents to officials.

Know Your Decision Makers

It is important to do some research on decision makers before starting to build relationships with them and communicating preservation priorities. Knowing what motivates elected officials can be helpful in advocating for a particular cause. Most state governments as well as individual legislators have websites with information on voting records, personal history of elected officials, campaign platforms, and so on.

Consider researching the following questions:

- What is the official’s background: hometown, school, previous career, outside interests? This helps to identify possible allies who have worked with the official in the past and issues that are important to the official.
- What district does the elected official represent? What Main Streets and historic resources are in this district?
- What committee memberships does the official hold? What is the official’s seniority? This will help advocates determine what types of policy the official directly impacts and the official’s relative influence among his or her colleagues.
- What are the official’s positions on the issues that relate to Main Street and the preservation community? What is the official’s voting record on these matters?
- What other issues does the official support? This information will help link your preservation priorities with the issues that are at the forefront of an elected official’s policy agenda.
Effective Communication with Elected Officials

There are many different ways to communicate with elected officials, and the most appropriate depends on each unique situation. In general, communication with elected officials can take place via e-mail, social media, mail, telephone, virtual meetings or face-to-face meetings.

Meet Regularly in Multiple Locations

Face to face meetings can take place in their offices back in the district or neighborhood and at city hall, in the state legislative offices, and on Capitol Hill. Tours of historic districts, individual buildings or projects, and Main Streets are one of the most effective advocacy tools because officials can see the problems encountered, ways that they can assist, and the jobs being created. Successful meetings include knowledge experts (e.g., architect or business owner), policy experts (e.g., someone who can explain what assistance is needed from the official), trusted advisors or long-time acquaintances of the official, and constituents. Each person conveys a talking point or two that represents their constituency's concerns. Officials greatly appreciate multiple constituencies coming together to jointly support a recommendation.

Because personalization to the greatest extent possible is desired, face-to-face meetings are usually preferable, but that doesn’t mean that other forms of communication can’t be effective. The method you use to communicate is not nearly as important as your message. A thoughtful, personalized, and well-written e-mail, tweet or letter sent electronically that explains how a preservation issue will directly impact constituents and/or the elected official’s district can have nearly the same effect as a personal visit. Avoid form letters or a formulaic response. Make the message your own and have it reflect your genuine passion for the subject. Regardless of the method, elected officials care most about the concerns of their constituents because they want to represent them well and also to get reelected! Communications that hold the most weight with elected officials are from those they represent, so advocates should state clearly in any communications that they are a constituent.

U.S. Representative Richard Hudson (NC-8), right, stands with Diane Young, executive director of the Concord Downtown Development Corporation, and Patrick Riley, principal at Rehab Development, in an apartment in the Hotel Concord renovation project. Hudson toured the facility as well as Lofts 29 to discuss historic tax credits.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANE YOUNG
Advocates can start building their relationship with elected officials with general information about their Main Streets or preservation programs. From there advocates can advance to specific requests and then—following the hoped-for success—to recognition events. Even if it is necessary to jump in immediately with a request on a specific issue, advocates should continue to follow up with information about their efforts to strengthen the relationship.

**Communicate on Multiple Channels**

First communicate the importance of preservation to officials and their staff. Elected officials want and expect to hear from constituents and appreciate their efforts. If elected officials don’t know priorities, they can’t effectively represent their constituents or make informed decisions on issues regarding historic preservation and community revitalization. Remember that decision makers are constantly balancing interests of concerned citizens, so make sure elected officials are familiar with preservation issues. A few ways in which to engage elected officials include:

- providing them with current information through newsletters and social media,
inviting them to speak at or attend meetings, and

• ensuring that they are included at Main Street and preservation events in their district, such as groundbreakings or ribbon-cuttings.

Educate

Next, become a reliable information resource to elected officials on matters concerning historic preservation and Main Street. Although elected officials and their staff tend to have general knowledge on a wide variety of subjects, they rely on experts in the field to guide and educate them when it comes to the specifics. You should aim to be the “go-to” person for decision makers when they have a question. Some examples of helpful information to provide to your elected officials include:

• background on the history and significance of your community

• general information on state and local Main Street and preservation organizations

• annual copies of economic benefit studies and reinvestment statistics

• updates on projects in your community or district

Dos and Don’t’s for Communicating with Elected Officials

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<th>DO:</th>
<th>DON’T:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Conduct your research ahead of time</td>
<td>• Give false or misconstrued information</td>
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<td>• Mention you are a constituent</td>
<td>• Focus on too many priorities</td>
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<td>• Make clear, concise arguments</td>
<td>• Be overly wordy or go into too much detail</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide relevant examples</td>
<td>• Be intimidated</td>
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<td>• Be polite, address officials properly</td>
<td>• Threaten or be demanding</td>
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<td>• Make a specific request</td>
<td>• Expect an immediate response</td>
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<td>• Be aware of the official’s interests and priorities</td>
<td>• Be disappointed to be referred to legislative staff</td>
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<td>• Include your contact information</td>
<td>• Use technical jargon</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Follow-up with additional information</td>
<td>• Forget to answer any questions they asked</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Say thank you</td>
<td>• Forget to recognize them for their support</td>
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Make “The Ask”

Once a relationship with elected officials is established and they are familiar with Main Street and preservation concerns, the next step is to approach them on specific ways they can advance a policy agenda. Typical requests include asking officials to support or sponsor legislation that would benefit preservation, to vote a certain way on a measure, to include historic preservation in a legislative platform, or to attend an event. Regardless of the request, make sure you clearly communicate what you want them to do and use local examples to show how their support for the action you are requesting would benefit the official’s state, district, or community.

Recognize Contributions

It is important to recognize elected officials when their time or actions have benefited historic preservation. In addition to directly thanking decision makers for their efforts, advocates should take the opportunity to acknowledge their support in a more public way. This can be done at a variety of occasions such as tours, ribbon cuttings, or a press conference. Other options include bestowing an award or honor on the elected official, or by acknowledging decision makers in the press through a letter to the editor or social media. In any case, it is important to let elected officials know that the preservation community appreciates their support of historic preservation and can be counted on to publicly recognize them, whenever it is appropriate.

What to Communicate

Whether by e-mail, letter, phone, or on a tour, a carefully crafted message conveys to decision makers that historic preservation and Main Street is very important to your community. Be sure all communication is clear, concise, and direct.

Some effective communication strategies include:

- Identify spokespeople who would be effective at communicating your message.
• Develop a short (no more than one-page) briefing to summarize the benefits and expected outcomes of key policies. This can be useful for any type of stakeholder: an elected official, a member of the press, a potential volunteer, or a potential funder.

• Prepare case studies showcasing successful or potential preservation projects in an elected official’s district complete with images.

• Have handy a brief “elevator speech” that summarizes your concerns in case you run into an elected official or stakeholder and have the opportunity for a very brief conversation.

• Distribute sign-on letters with multiple signers or letters from key individuals, businesses or organizations that reiterate the requested action. Identify possible coalition partners and evaluate their potential.

Conclusion

Successful Main Streets, deserving projects, and other worthy preservation causes depend on support from elected officials that can enact policies. Your voice matters in our legislative process and effective communication ensures that the preservation message is heard by decision makers. Preservationists envision a future where leaders who make decisions impacting our built environment consider the reuse of historic buildings an essential strategy to create more inclusive, prosperous, and resilient communities. That message is a compelling one so promote your cause with determination and persistence. Your community and its heritage deserve nothing less.

Resources

*A Blueprint for Lobbying* by Susan West Montgomery, National Trust for Historic Preservation

*Advocacy Resources*, American Alliance of Museums

*Everyday Advocacy Resources*, National Council of Nonprofits

*The Legislative Process*, United States House of Representatives
Main Street America has been helping revitalize older and historic commercial districts for 40 years. Today it is a network of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.