

Meeting with your MPP: Some Helpful Hints

The following discussion on lobbying your own MPP is adapted from an article entitled A Physician's Guide to Political Lobbying, which first appeared in the September 1995 issue of the Ontario Medical Review. It is adapted with the permission of the Ontario Medical Association, and was reprinted in Protecting the Niagara Escarpment: A Citizen's Guide, published by the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE).

Perhaps the most misunderstood role in modern politics is that of the lobbyist. Lobbying is the act of influencing either an individual or group of people about a specific issue or a political decision. By lobbying, we are simply exercising one of our most basic rights – to have a say in how we are governed. Lobbying is undoubtedly the most important political skill that an individual or organization must develop in order to be recognized as more than just a spectator in the political arena. And while it may be preferable to leave this chore to others, political action, by definition, implies involvement.

Lobbying elected officials such as your MPP may seem intimidating. However, there are a few simple rules to make the task a lot easier:

- Keep in mind that your MPP is a busy person. Besides being required to follow a rigorous parliamentary schedule, he or she must devote considerable time attending to constituents' needs. And whether your MPP is a Cabinet minister or a backbencher, it is likely that much of his or her time will be spent listening to other lobbyists, whose interest could very well conflict with yours. So it is vital that you do your homework before you pick up the telephone to make an appointment.
- Learn all you can about the riding and your MPP's background. Reviewing back issues of your local paper may give you a sense of the main issues of concern to fellow constituents, and therefore to your MPP. As well, it may be a good idea to look at some Hansard transcripts, which are the official record of the daily proceedings of the Legislature, available in many public libraries and on the Internet. You can read what your MPP has had to say on a variety of issues. Watch a few segments of the Legislature's question period on television (evening re-runs of that day's proceedings), especially if you hear that your MPP has just made a statement or asked a question.
- Prepare a list of the issues you want to bring to your MPP's attention, and prioritize them. Remember that because your MPP is busy, you are likely to get only a half-hour meeting. Your MPP may ask for a written list of your issues in advance. Use the time to best advantage by putting at the bottom of your list those issues that are not essential to cover.

- While it may be more convenient for you to meet with your MPP at his or her constituency office, and while MPPs generally set aside time to do this, be prepared to travel to Queen's Park in Toronto if that is the only meeting location offered to you.
- Be prepared to answer questions from your MPP, not just ask them of him or her. A successful dialogue is never one-sided.
- Perhaps nothing is as crucial as the attitude you display toward your MPP. You must be positive and professional. Arrive early for the meeting and do not try to exceed the agreed-upon time limit, unless your MPP offers to do so. You are trying to build a relationship; you don't want your first meeting to be your last. And don't just bring up problems – offers solutions too.
- During the meeting, be sure to make your MPP aware that you are willing to serve as a local resource to him or her on Oak Ridges Moraine issues. This offer will likely please your MPP (and may surprise him or her, too), since most lobbyists the MPP encounters will only want to “take” and not “give.” Explain how you can help your MPP – either in dealing with constituents or with fellow MPPs – when Moraine matters arise.
- After the meeting, thank your MPP for his or her time and send a follow-up letter within a week or two. It should be short and cordial, even if you didn't reach agreement, and should reiterate what was said in the meeting. You could also suggest that you and your MPP continue to meet from time to time to keep each other abreast of Moraine news.
- Before you leave your MPP's office, make sure his or her executive assistant knows how to keep in touch with you or your group (leave a card if you have one, and ask for one of theirs). It is important to make this contact with the MPP's “gatekeeper,” the person who manages the MPP's schedule and helps determine who gains access and who does not.

The Opposition Parties

The influence that your own MPP has on the government naturally depends on whether her or she is in the government caucus or an opposition caucus. Particularly if your own MPP is a government member, you may want to keep opposition MPPs informed of your concerns too. This is not, and should not be used as an “end run” around your own MPP, but just the politically sensible thing to do. Since the Oak Ridges Moraine falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs (i.e, the “one-window” approach), inform the opposition party critics for Municipal Affairs and the Liberal critic for the Oak Ridges Moraine (MPP Mike Colle at 416 325-8707) of your concerns, either in writing or by requesting a meeting. If you decide to “feed” interesting information to the opposition

that could embarrass the government, make absolutely sure that your information is reliable and accurate. If it's not, and the MPP uses it in the Legislature, you will embarrass not the government, but yourself, your group, the MPP and his or her party. That opposition door is sure to be closed to you after that.

Go to the *List of MPPs on the Moraine* in the Campaign Toolbox directory for the necessary addresses, telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Premier

While few Moraine citizens' groups are able to secure a meeting with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, and even fewer (if any) with the Premier, telephone calls and letters on timely Moraine issues are critically important. In both the Premier's and the Minister's offices, the numbers of telephone calls and letters received are an important barometer of the public's concern about a given issue. It is likely that the staff taking the calls and receiving the letters will convey those concerns to the Premier and Minister.

Keep a telephone message for the Premier or Minister very short – one sentence is all that the staff person is likely to write down. Keep your letter to one page if possible. If you are writing about a specific problem on the Moraine, always offer a practical solution. If you are writing to urge the Premier or Minister to take certain actions, point out why it is in not only his or her interest, but also in the public interest, to do so.

While you will almost always get a reply to a letter, don't be surprised if it comes two or three months (or more) after you wrote. The volume of letters received by the Premier and Ministers is phenomenal.

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