



Tips for Meeting with Your Elected Officials

From your local town council to your senators and representatives in Washington, meeting with your elected officials is important to advancing bicycling and walking—and it's easier than you think! Constituent meetings are perfectly legal for non-profit leaders (for more see <http://www.afj.org> and click Non-Profits) and should be an integral part of any advocacy strategy. It's also democracy at work! Constituent meetings provide the opportunity to build relationships with your members of Congress and their staff and can be scheduled for any number of reasons ranging from a simple briefing on your organization to asking the member to support specific issues and vote on specific legislation.

You don't have to travel to Washington, DC to reach your member of Congress. Every congressional member has one or more offices in their home district where they spend time during the Congressional recesses. If you are unable to schedule a meeting when the member is in town, you can still schedule a meeting to meet with one of the staffers at the district office. Don't forget, staffers are often very knowledgeable and have great influence with the member. They will relay your message to the legislator.

Below are some tips to help you prepare for a productive and successful meeting.

BEFORE the meeting

Pick Your Team

- Decide who you will take with you. Aim for 3-6 people. More than that many can be overwhelming.
- Pick a diverse team. A leader of an advocacy organization, someone from the business community (bike shop or running store owner), a leader of the local bike club, a leader of the local AARP, or someone representing an environmental or health organization.
- If you know someone with a personal connection to the legislator or a staffer, bring them! They will be your best "in".
- Choose one person to "chair" the meeting.
- Choose another person to be note taker for the meeting, keeping careful notes of what the legislator and staff say.
- When scheduling your meeting, let them know who you are and what you want to talk about. Also tell them who you will be bringing with you (i.e. a small group from the biking and walking community).
- If you are trying to meet with a senator or representative, try to schedule your meeting at the legislator's home district office while they are in recess or ask when they might be in town (Monday or Friday?). You don't need to travel to DC to meet with your legislator and they will likely be more relaxed while in their home district.

Request an Appointment

- Send your request for a meeting in writing via fax or e-mail and follow up with a phone call to your elected official's office.
- Make sure to let them know you are a constituent. If you do not live in the legislator's district, someone who does and is going with you should make the call.
- Monday and Friday are usually the best dates for district meetings and increase the chance the legislator will be there.
- **Do Your Homework**
 - Research the legislator's previous positions on your issue. Try to find at least one positive thing they have done for biking and walking that you can thank them for (are they a member of the Congressional Bike Caucus, did they cosponsor something you support etc.).
 - Know what committees the legislator serves on, their interests, and background to help you craft your pitch.
 - Get your facts and talking points straight before the meeting. Try to have no more than 2-3 main points and decide who will say what beforehand. Bring some literature to leave behind. A one-page fact sheet on your issue and a brochure from your organization is ideal.

DURING the meeting

Be Professional

- Dress nice! Legislators and their aides dress professionally. Dress suit, slacks, and ties are common. You don't need to go out and buy anything new, but show your respect and dress as professionally as possible. Iron your shirt and polish your shoes. First impressions matter!
- Be polite. Even if the legislator isn't.
- If the legislator doesn't make it, do not be disappointed. Staff are key and do much of the work, and legislators schedule do legitimately shift frequently. Focus on building the relationship with that staffer and you will be more successful down the road (they may even become your inside advocate!).

Thank, Introduce, Inform

- Start your meeting by thanking them for their time (and previous support if any). Make sure you know and double check how much time they have for your meeting so you can get your points and ask in during the allotted time.
- Briefly introduce your team: name, organization, how many members your organization represents, and where you live if you are in their district.
- Tell them why you are there. What specific bill are you interested in? State your 2-3 talking points.
- Connect biking and walking to their district. How does biking and walking impact their constituents and communities. Can you point to any examples?
- Stay on topic. You have limited time—make it count!
- While attentively listening, strive to keep the legislator and their staff on topic. Drifting into stories and small talk is a classic tactic to divert or avoid commitments.

Ask!

- Ask your legislator for their position on the issue. Also ask what concerns they may have. Pay careful attention to their language and examples as these will give you important insights on their priorities and how you might angle your issue or request. Address their concerns if you can.
- Make your ask! Be sure to ask your legislator to do something while you are there: co-sponsor a bill, support a piece of legislation, appear at or participate in an event, meet with you again (as needed) etc..

Be Honest

- If you are asked something you don't know the answer to, offer to get back to them with more information. Your future credibility is at stake.

Get a Photo

- Ask if you can get your photo with them that you can include in your print newsletter and/or web site.

Thank Again

- When the meeting is wrapping up be sure to reach some closure.
- If there is an event coming up in the months or year ahead, be sure to invite them.
- Thank them again for their time and attention.

AFTER the meeting

Say Thank-You and Follow Up

- Send the legislator a handwritten thank you note and any follow-up material you said you would provide.
- If you've asked your legislator to take action and they were undecided, make sure to follow up with them on your request.
- Follow up again if needed. Some legislators hope that you won't! They know that leaving you unsatisfied is better than saying "No" so don't let them off easy – follow through!

Continue to Engage

- Invite the legislator and staff to future events—ribbon cutting, bike to work day celebration, or a big bike ride.
- Give the legislator and their offices a complimentary subscription to your print newsletter so they can stay up-to-date with your organization's work.

Need more help?

Alliance for Biking & Walking can help you plan and strategize for your meeting. We can also point you to some great resources for talking points at www.PeoplePoweredMovement.org/library.

Good luck at your meeting!

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