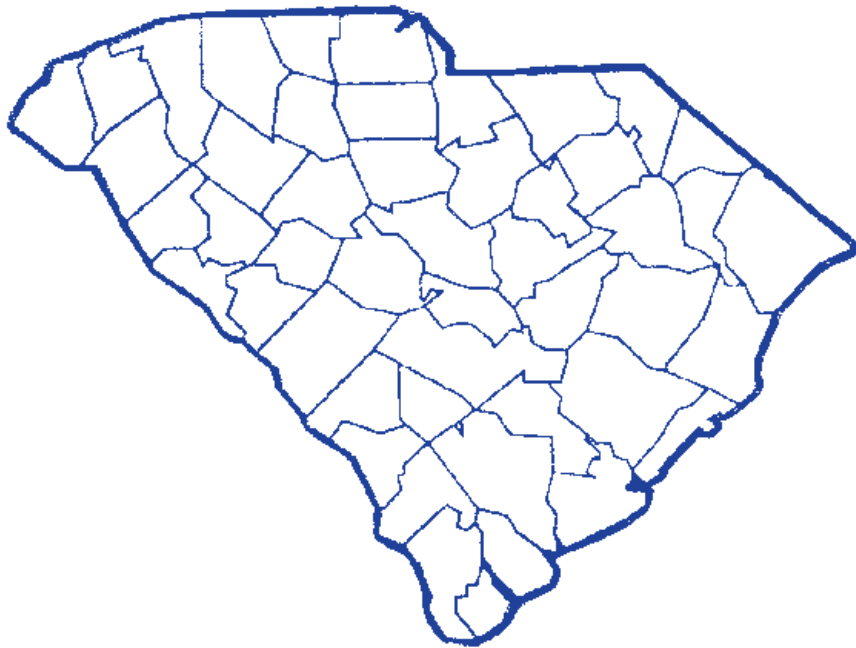


Building Relationships with the General Assembly



South Carolina Association of Counties
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Preface

This handbook contains several techniques intended to assist county officials in the pursuit of building relationships with members of the General Assembly. We believe this manual will lead to greater persuasiveness in the Association's relationship with the General Assembly. It is hoped that county officials and employees will refer to this manual while proceeding with their efforts to speak with members of the General Assembly about topics of interest to the counties and county officials.

This publication is intended to give you a readily available reference book to help build relationships with the General Assembly. Should you need additional assistance, the South Carolina Association of Counties' staff is available to help all county officials and employees. Whether your question involves the exact status of legislation or a matter requiring the interpretation of law, the Association's staff is available to serve you. Please call, write or email the Association at the numbers and addresses below:



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Columbia, South Carolina 29202-8207

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Developing Relationships and Communicating with the Legislature

The key to any relationship is communication. Without properly communicating ideas and positions, no one will know the position of the counties on legislative issues pending before the legislature. When developing a relationship with legislators, it is important to remember the way we communicate is just as important as what we say. There are several effective methods of communicating with members of the General Assembly. However, using the right one at the appropriate time is essential to have an impact on the legislative process.

One of the most important things to remember is that your relationship with members of the General Assembly should go beyond just communicating positions of the South Carolina Association of Counties. Take every opportunity you have to speak with the members of the General Assembly when there isn't a pressing matter under consideration. Not surprisingly, legislators are reluctant to be persuaded when the only time you speak or communicate with them is when you need a vote or to complain. Take the time to get to know your delegation. County government and state government are in the unique position that their constituencies are the same. Every person in South Carolina is represented by a member of the General Assembly and by a county councilman.

Please schedule a meeting with your delegation allowing yourself time to meet and speak to each other. If you are in Columbia during the legislative session, stop by the statehouse just to check in and say hello to your delegation. Additionally, take the time to thank members of your delegation when they do something good for your county. It is important to communicate the good as well as the bad. If all a member ever hears are complaints, they will begin to shut down avenues of communication.

To have an impact on the legislative process, county officials must communicate with their Senators and Representatives for them to understand the counties' concerns. You must provide them with factual information about issues affecting your county. Legislators want your opinions, especially on subjects that directly affect you and your county. They need your special insight and real-life experiences to address an issue intelligently. County officials are the real experts on county related issues. Remember that SCAC staff are always available to assist you in any efforts you make to communicate with the members of the legislature.



Do's and Don'ts of Communicating with the Legislature

There are some basic principles to enhance one's ability when communicating ideas or positions for the SCAC. These principles are summarized below:

1. Be polite and courteous; Don't be argumentative or threatening.
2. When seeking commitments of support from a legislator, be clear and to the point; Don't be evasive.
3. When discussing legislative issues, know the reasons for supporting the SCAC position; Don't support the issue because "someone told me to do this."
4. When meeting with a legislator, schedule the meeting in advance; Don't show up unannounced and expect a meeting on the spot.
5. When discussing an issue with a legislator, give a brief overview of the legislation; Don't assume they know what you are talking about.
6. When discussing an issue with a legislator, be sure to know the issue; Don't be caught off guard or unprepared to answer questions.
7. When writing to a legislator on a particular issue, make sure to include the bill number and its current status; Don't assume that the legislator knows about the bill or its status.
8. Become familiar with the personal interests and concerns of a given lawmaker prior to formal contact.
9. Face to face visits with lawmakers in their home districts are very effective.
10. Don't expect to have a substantive meeting with a lawmaker, particularly in Columbia during a legislative session, unless you have an appointment. Even then, understand that they may be delayed by developments beyond their control.
11. Identify the reason for your meeting in advance. This will allow the lawmakers and staff an opportunity to be better prepared.
12. Seek a specific commitment but do not necessarily interpret a lawmaker's unwillingness to make a specific commitment as opposition to your position. A lawmaker may have legitimate reasons for hesitation, none of which may be related to opposition (e.g., the need to discuss the issue with other involved groups).
13. Keep the door open for future contact if a particular lawmaker appears to be opposed to your views. A lawmaker may change positions after learning more facts.

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14. Follow-up. Letters to express your appreciation and summarize your understanding of the result should follow meetings or other verbal discussions. If you were asked to provide additional information, do so promptly. When you write, be sincere. Say what you want in your own words. Don't copy a form letter and avoid covering several issues in a single letter.
 15. Keep SCAC staff informed of your work and results.



Face to Face Communications

The face to face meeting is the best way to communicate SCAC's position on legislative issues. Many people hesitate to speak to their legislators in this fashion, feeling ill-equipped to persuade them. Do not be afraid of your elected representatives. Remember, they are human beings, who need and expect to deal with many people in the course of their jobs. They often appreciate getting information – unavailable from any other source – that helps them make a decision on how to vote. Keep in mind that the members represent the same people that you do. It is likely they have the same desire to meet constituent needs as you. Perhaps it would be a good idea to set up regular formal meetings between county council and the legislative delegation to brief one another on issues or programs each group is working on. Who, for example, knows more about county government than county government officials?

Before scheduling any meeting, read through this section. It will assist you in having a productive meeting, presenting views effectively and receiving feedback from the legislator.

Personal Visit to a Senator or Representative's Office

The most effective meeting with a legislator is a one-on-one meeting. In this setting, you are face to face with the lawmaker and have the opportunity to discuss issues affecting the counties.

SCAC creates several opportunities throughout the year for personal visits with members of your delegation. They include The SCAC Mid-Year Conference and legislative reception as well as SCAC Lobby Days. These are great opportunities to make an appointment to visit or arrange a dinner between council and the delegation.

Regular meetings between the council and the legislative delegation to update one another on issues each one is working on help avoid surprises and to keep lines of communication open.

Always call in advance to schedule a meeting, whether it's in the district or in Columbia. Legislators are usually busy; just showing up at the office doesn't mean you will get to meet with the member.

When scheduling the meeting, be sure to let the legislator's office know what issues will be discussed. This will allow the legislator to prepare for the meeting. Be prepared to discuss the issue and be ready to answer any questions the legislator may have. It's easy to ask the member to support a bill, but if they have questions about the bill, it is necessary to supply them with factual information that addresses their concerns about the issue.

When meeting with a legislator, keep in mind that the meeting time will be limited. You may only have 10 or 15 minutes to discuss the issue. Therefore, after the preliminary greetings, get down to business right away. Do not try to discuss five or six issues; rather, limit the discussion to one or two important issues. This allows more time to discuss those issues in detail and allows the legislator to ask questions. Also, do not assume that the legislator is thoroughly knowledgeable about the issue

or bill. Take a minute or two and give a brief description of the legislation in question. This will guarantee you that the member knows the issue and will enhance the arguments for your position. If the member starts to stray away from the issue, politely steer the conversation back to the issue subject. Don't give in and waste the opportunity to get a commitment from the legislator.

After the discussion with the legislator, ask for a commitment to support the SCAC position. The request can be in several forms: seeking co-sponsors for the bill; asking them to vote a certain way on the bill or amendments; or asking them not to actively oppose a bill if they don't support it. Don't be afraid to come right out and ask for the member's support in one of the above fashions. If you don't ask, the member won't voluntarily offer to make a commitment. If the legislator is truly undecided on the issue, don't force the issue, because you may push them in the wrong direction. Rather, offer to provide the member with additional information about the issue and offer to be available should they want to discuss the issue further.

When the meeting is over, thank the legislator for his or her time and reiterate any commitments made. Follow-up the meeting with a brief letter, thanking them for the meeting and reiterating any commitments in writing. This reinforces their commitment and puts them on record.

Meeting a Member of the General Assembly at the Statehouse

Often the only opportunity to have a face to face meeting with a member of the General Assembly will be at the Statehouse. The House and Senate Chambers are on the second floor of the Statehouse. Generally the lobby is very crowded with lobbyists, visitors, and other people interested in meeting with legislators. Although the Statehouse can be the best place to find members of your delegation, keep in mind that time with your individual legislators will be very limited.

In front of each chamber is a desk with forms you can fill out requesting an opportunity to speak with a member of the General Assembly. After filling out the form hand the form to the employee at the desk. They will take the form to the individual member informing them of your presence. Remember that if an important issue is being debated on the floor, or if the legislator is preparing to speak, it may take some time for a legislator to come out after receiving the form. SCAC staff will always be in the lobby during legislative sessions and will be available to assist you when trying to meet a legislator at the Statehouse.

The Message

The most important task in your communications effort is to develop and deliver the message so that your elected official understands that this issue is important to you and to the people in your district. The key to this message is to be accurate, be brief, and tell your elected official something new.

Accuracy means you never go beyond what you know to be absolutely, mathematically true. Never knowingly lie or exaggerate or distort your facts or the other side's position. If you are asked a question that you cannot answer, state that you will find the answer or have a member of the SCAC staff provide the answer.

Politicians want you to be brief. You must be able to state what you want and why you want it in 30 seconds. If you are able to deliver your message in 30 seconds then you will boil it down to its essence.

Politicians are inundated with information all day. The key to grabbing their attention is to tell them something new. A great way to grasp the elected official's attention is an anecdotal story. If you can tell a story to the official which explains why the issue is important to them or the people they represent then you will be able to influence their decision making. Always have a story which relates to the issue you are discussing when meeting face to face with an elected official.

Outline for a Face to Face Meeting with a Legislator:

1. Tasks to be assigned for each legislative visit
 - A. Getting the appointment
 - B. Who will talk and who will listen (if more than one person is meeting with the legislator)
 - C. Setting the tone and making introductions
 - D. Personal stories to be told
 - E. Asking for commitment
 - F. Ending the appointment ("Thank you Senator/Representative...")
 2. Put yourself in the right frame of mind
 - A. Don't be awed by the legislator
 - B. He or she is a jack-of-all-trades, not all knowing
 - C. You may know more about your issue than the legislator does
 - D. Dress for success
 - E. Act confident even if you don't feel it
 3. Sell yourself then sell the issue
 - A. Plan for no more than five minutes to make your case
 - B. The legislator can and will extend the time if you show:
 1. The issue is of concern to many voters
 2. Whether you are likely to help or hurt him next election
 - c. Are you a staunch opponent no matter what they do on your issue
 - d. Are you and your friends part of the swing vote they need to capture
 4. Start by showing you are a friendly person
 - A. Complement something he or she has done (SCAC information will help)
 - B. Reference a mutual friend
 5. Show you are serious about your issue
 - A. Do your homework using SCAC information
 - B. Start by saying what you are asking them to do
If they interrupt and agree, you don't need to go on presenting your arguments.
Talk specifics.
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1. What is the legislator willing to do as a supporter
 2. How can you help them
 - C. Give your arguments
 1. Start with points the legislator will agree with
 2. Give them a chance to say they agree
 3. Move on to arguments they may not agree with
 - D. Don't let them lead you off track
 - E. Stress how your issue affects you and others in their district
6. Be a good listener
- A. Let the legislator ask questions as you go along
 - B. Answer questions with hard facts –or–
 - C. Promise to get the answer if they will schedule another appointment
 - D. You don't have to agree with their views but show that you are willing to hear them
 - E. Don't assume that hostile sounding questions mean opposition. The questions asked may be to gather answers to use with opponents
7. Ask for a commitment unless he or she is clearly opposed. Ask if the legislator will:
- A. Vote for the issue
 - B. Co-sponsor the legislation
 - C. Co-sponsor the amendment being requested
8. If the legislator is on your side, make them feel good about it so they will work even harder
9. Say "Thank you" regardless of the outcome
- A. Do it in person at the conclusion of the meeting
 - B. Do it again in a letter
10. Don't:
- A. Be late for your appointment
 - B. Take/talk too long
 - C. Overstate
 - D. Be hostile

Quick Tips on an Effective Meeting:

1. Always be polite! Never be argumentative, call names or threaten.
 2. Make an appointment. Don't be disappointed if your appointment is set up with a staff person. Legislators are busy and staff members pass the information they receive on to their bosses. Often, by developing a rapport with a staff member, you open an important line of communication to that office. If your meeting is to be with the legislator, not a staff member, it will usually be specified.
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3. Be on time. Identify yourself. If you are a registered voter in the legislator's district, say so.
 4. Present a clear message. If you are with a number of fellow county officials, choose one person to speak for your group. Get your point across in the fewest possible words. Say exactly what you want the policy maker to do – using your own words or the language prepared by SCAC staff. If your issue involves legislation, cite the specific bill number.
 5. Use hard facts to support your arguments. Leave supporting documents whenever possible.
 6. Be prepared for questions, even challenges. If a question throws you off balance because you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to admit it. Say you will research the matter and report back to them.
 7. Be a good listener. Give the legislator or staff member a chance to express their point of view.
 8. Give special recognition to legislators who are known to be on your side. Ask them for advice and help in reaching other legislators and suggestions for ways to communicate the issue to their colleagues.
 9. If a legislator or staff member expresses opposition to your viewpoint, try to leave on a friendly note so you will have access to them in the future.
 10. Be gracious. If your meeting was with a legislator, thank them for taking the time to listen to your point of view. If your meeting was with a staff member, thank them for communicating your viewpoint to their boss and ask for a written reply if you want one.
 11. Never talk about legislators, staff members, political parties, or other individuals involved with your issue when you are in hallways or elevators before or after meetings. There are lots of operatives. They will know who you represent, but you won't know who they represent or what side they are on.
 12. Follow up your visit with a thank-you letter. Restate your case briefly and provide any information you may have promised during your meeting. This gives you a second chance to make your point.



Registering Your Opinion by Phone

Telephone calls are another effective means of communicating with a legislator.

Telephone calls, as with letters, should be planned out in advance. Follow the same guidelines used for writing a letter. Because legislators and their staffs are busy, calls should not last longer than three to five minutes, unless the person wants to talk longer to gather additional information about the issue.

Before making a call, be sure to have a clear understanding of the issue and your position, the reasons for that position, and the action needed to be taken on the issue by the legislator. To assist you in making the call, jot down a few notes before placing the call. When placing a call, always ask to speak directly to the legislator.

Remember, always ask for the legislator's position on the issue. If you find out how the legislator intends to vote, immediately notify SCAC staff.

A Guide to Telephone Calls:

1. Try to call the Representative/Senator at their work office in their home community.
2. Don't expect to speak to the legislator directly
3. Rules of the Call:
 - A. If you get to speak with the legislator:
 1. Introduce yourself as a voter
 2. Tell the legislator your views on the issue in no more than one minute - that's about one long sentence
 3. Ask if they will support your position
 4. Be prepared with a script that lets you follow-through
 - B. If you have to leave a message with an assistant, tell them:
 1. That you want the legislator to know your views on the issue, i.e. "I would like to know if they will support..."
 2. Leave your name, address and phone number
 3. Ask for a reply by mail or by phone
4. Using a phone script
 - A. A script is a guide:
 1. Keep it short and to the point
 2. Indicate where to wait for an answer
 3. Write everything out beginning with "Hello, my name is..."
 4. When the legislator can say "Yes" or "No" print responses to both
 5. Remember to end with "thank you"

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- B. Turn the script into your own words
 - C. Practice
 - D. Smile (practice in front of a mirror)
 - E. Make it a two-way conversation. Allow plenty of places and time for answers
 - F. Set it up, put it down (“Will you support...”). Do not linger on the issue
 - G. If you don’t know the answer to a question say you will find out. Then do it and call back.

Quick Phone Calling Tips:

1. Ask to speak to your legislator. Some legislators may have voice mail. If so, that would be the most expeditious way to leave a message for your legislator.
2. You are not likely to reach your legislator on the first try, so plan to leave a phone number where you can be reached later in the day. Most legislators are very conscientious about returning phone calls from constituents.
3. When speaking with your legislator or leaving a message, be brief and to the point. Try to limit your call to one or two subjects. Include all bill titles and numbers whenever possible.



Letter Writing

One well-written letter may influence a legislator to agree with your position. However, an effective legislative campaign usually depends upon large numbers of personal letters and other types of communications. Legislators will take note when they receive large numbers of letters from constituents on an issue.

Because it takes more than one letter, you should encourage other county officials to write letters.

Writing letters to legislators serves several purposes: to express an opinion on an issue and urge the member to support your views with their votes; to congratulate and thank a member for a particular vote; or to express polite disapproval with a vote they cast. When writing to your legislator, keep it polite. Do not become confrontational or threatening. It won't benefit either you or SCAC's legislative efforts.

Writing a letter to a legislator is a simple task. Letters should be clear, accurate and brief. To write an effective letter, some basic guidelines and easy rules are listed below. Read them carefully—because letters will count more if they are written correctly.

The Importance of Letter Writing:

Letter writing is important because:

1. It puts faces, personal stories and names on your issues
2. It has maximum impact on a legislator's opinion forming process
3. It promotes quality communication between large numbers of individual members and their legislators
4. It is a way of pressing for a commitment

What to do in your letter writing campaign:

1. Encourage, inform and assist everyone willing to write
2. Maintain lists of those who write and share the names of those to whom you write with others. They may be willing and able to do more.
3. Keep track, by legislator, of the answers received. Turn information over to SCAC for use in their contacts.

Quick Tips for Writing an Effective Letter:

1. Keep the letters brief and to the point. A letter does not have to be several pages long to be effective. A couple of concise paragraphs will do the job.
2. Sign your name over your typed or neatly written signature at the end of your letter.
3. Write about only one issue per letter; save other issues for later letters. State the name and number of the bill about which you are writing.

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4. State clearly the reason for writing. Personal experiences are the best supporting evidence. Explain how the issue would affect you, your colleagues; or what effect it could have on the member's district or state.
 5. Don't be argumentative. Make your points as quickly as possible - do not engage in a debate.
 6. Ask the legislator to state their position on the issue by replying to you. Constituents have a right to ask legislators their position on issues.
 7. Don't just write when you have a complaint. It is important not to miss a chance to thank elected officials for their votes or assistance on legislative issues.
 8. Never threaten political retaliation if a legislator disagrees with you. This type of attitude could cost SCAC support on future issues.
 9. Avoid the use of form letters. Form letters have little impact with a member of the legislature.
 10. Notify SCAC staff of any commitments made by a legislator on any county related issues.



Email Messages

Because of sudden developments at the Statehouse, it is sometimes necessary to contact legislators on short notice. Writing a letter may take too much time to get your message to Columbia, but an email message can get to your legislator in a matter of hours or overnight. As legislators have become more computer savvy, email messages have become a very useful tool to communicate with the legislature. The best way to utilize email is to follow the same techniques as drafting a letter, outlined above.

Email messages are a way to communicate quickly. However, they have a drawback. Legislators have proved to dislike “spam” as much as the average internet user. “Spam” is the result of a mass sending of email to all legislators. If email is addressed to everybody, it will be received by nobody.

However, email has a good chance of being heard, if only as a statistic. In many offices, what is counted is how many votes for, how many votes against. The fact is, the votes are counted.

A well crafted email, sent to a particular legislator, with the sender identified, can carry weight.

Letters to the Editor

All newspapers run a “Letters to the Editor” section on their editorial page. Letters to the editor attract attention. Besides bringing an issue to the attention of the community and educating them about its importance, letters can garner support from other groups within the community that would be sympathetic and lend their assistance. This avenue also affords you a way to respond to hostile or misrepresented articles, editorials or other letters to the editor that differ from the SCAC position. Whatever the reason for writing a letter, the letter should not be abusive, but should be tactful, brief and to the point. Remember, people respect county officials, and it is important to uphold that respect to remain credible. Also, the legislators and their staff constantly scan the local editorials to see what constituents are saying.



Report Back the Results

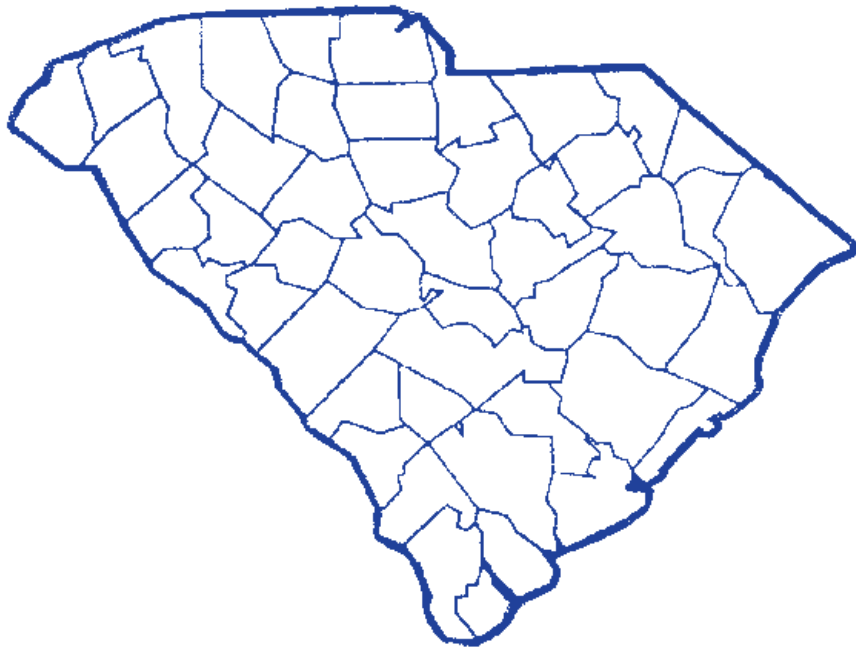
As mentioned earlier, the one fundamental key to a successful legislative program is communication. Without a constant flow of two-way communications, the success of any effort is limited and doomed for failure. Besides communications, another important piece of a successful legislative program is the accuracy of the information and the timing in which it is passed along.

On any given legislative issue, members of the Legislature will always be classified into three given categories: supporters, opponents and undecideds. Once this is done, our efforts will be to focus on those members who are undecided and work to convince them to support our position. Assistance and information provided to SCAC staff makes the job easier in speaking with legislators who are truly undecided. Reports of personal contacts, telephone calls or letter writing campaigns allow SCAC to work effectively and efficiently. If a legislator's position is not reported to SCAC staff, valuable time and resources could be wasted on a legislator who is already committed.



Notes

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