

# Grassroots Lobbying for Township Officials



INFORM



PERSUADE



ENGAGE



# YOU Can Make a Difference!



Over the years, the **Michigan Townships Association** has asked our members to take part in the lobbying process and to work with our legislative liaisons to get our message across to our elected officials. It is this partnership—this working together over the years—that has made MTA so successful in our efforts to advocate on behalf of township government.

In the era of term limits, the part you play in the lobbying process is more important than ever. Elected officials want to hear from their constituents and your voice carries a great deal of weight as elected officials frame their positions on issues and determine how they will vote. Legislators want to know how an issue will “play” back home. That is where you come in.



This guide focuses on legislative lobbying directed primarily at the Michigan Legislature and has been prepared to provide you with some essential tools needed to be effective in your lobbying efforts. Those of you who have been involved for many years know that this guide could not possibly present every detail of the lobbying process. It is designed as a review for those who have been actively involved for years. It is also meant to provide the basic concepts of lobbying for those getting involved for the first time.

## ***MTA Member Responsibilities***



While MTA has over 6,500 members, the Association is only as powerful and influential as the actions its members take individually and collectively. Each MTA member is vitally important to the effectiveness of the Association, and each member is responsible for its success. There are many different ways you can get involved in grassroots advocacy; **the important thing is to participate**, whether it’s by taking part in calling, writing or meeting with your legislators.

## **Other Ways to Communicate**

There are a number of ways you can get your story across to legislators. Some examples include:

- Invite your legislator to visit a facility that provides services to your citizens, and describe how those services will be affected by his or her vote on your issue. Such a visit, which can be arranged for a time when the legislator will be in the district, is perhaps the most effective way of communicating a need.
- Have your legislator speak at a public meeting in your township. Legislators usually appreciate such opportunities, if there is a chance to speak before a fairly large audience or if the audience is composed of people whom the legislator is particularly interested in reaching.
- Invite the legislator to meet your township board at the regular board meeting. You will probably know whether your legislator will want to attend. If you are uncertain—ask—there is nothing to lose.
- It is important to say “thank you.” Much of the time, we are asking for action and not always saying thank you when something positive is done. Recognition dinners, plaques presented at meetings, and letters to the editor praising the responsiveness of legislators can be an effective public way of saying we appreciate the effort.

# Remember: Your Voice Counts, But Only if You Use It!

## Grassroots Lobbying: What is it?

MTA's Legislative Liaisons maintain a constant presence with the Michigan Legislature. The liaisons meet with legislators, monitor committees, and stay a part of the action on a daily basis. But, MTA Legislative Liaisons are **MOST** effective when MTA members back them up at home by contacting their legislators directly. Legislators listen to their constituents. Their primary responsibility as elected officials is to meet the needs of the citizens they represent. After all, **YOU** helped put them in office.

Why get politically involved, you might ask? Legislative decisions directly impact your township and you should not let the Michigan Legislature make these important decisions without the input of those who are directly affected by them – township officials!

Now that you know why you should be involved in the political process, how do you become an effective grassroots lobbyist? **Following are some keys to open the door to grassroots lobbying.**

## Keys to Effective Grassroots Lobbying

Before contacting your legislators on an issue, do your homework. Make sure you not only know the issue, but also MTA's position. Your knowledge of issues and the legislative process produces credibility with your legislator; your credibility dictates your legislator's level of response. In all communications, whether by phone calls, letters or personal meetings, it is important to be accurate, brief, clear and timely.

Remember that legislators have many votes on their minds and demands on their time. They cannot learn about each issue in the same depth as you know your issues. Keep in mind that some issues take years to get through the Legislature, as faces change, as consensus builds, or as pressure for action mounts. Your continued participation in the legislative process on behalf of township government is essential for long-term success in the Legislature.

No matter how much you will sometimes want to, **never become angry or argumentative with your legislator** about his or her failure to support your position. You will almost certainly have to go back to that same legislator sometime in the future. If you have strained your relationship by getting angry—no matter how much you may have been justified in doing so—chances are that you won't get through the door. If you do, your information may be largely discounted.

## Who Represents You?

Find out who represents you in the State Legislature or Congress by visiting [www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org) by selecting "Contact Legislators" under the Legislative Department link.

## Status of Legislation

You can search for the status of legislation introduced in the Michigan House or Senate by visiting [www.michiganlegislature.org](http://www.michiganlegislature.org). You can search by bill number, sponsor or category.

## Contact MTA Legislative Liaisons

Your communication with state legislators is important to MTA. After communicating with a legislator, don't forget to contact MTA to inform our Legislative Liaisons of the details of your meeting or conversation. We can also assist you in providing additional information to the legislator.



David Bertram



Bill Anderson



Tom Frazier

MTA Legislative Liaisons

# Personal Visits

Personal meetings with your legislator are very highly ranked among effective ways of communicating your views. The first time you meet your legislator face to face, you may be nervous. Keep in mind, however, that legislators want to put their best foot forward with the leaders in their district, and they are sincerely interested in getting your views on legislation. Remember that you are the expert on the subject—you have information that your legislator needs.

If you have decided to meet with your legislator, there are ways to help the meeting run smoothly. It is important to make an appointment, if at all possible. It is better to telephone than to write for the appointment, because calling makes it easier to find an acceptable date. Some legislative offices may ask you to put your request for an appointment in writing. This allows them to collect as much information as possible on the meeting or event before making a decision.

It is acceptable to assemble a delegation for a meeting, but remember that small meetings will allow for more detailed discussion of an issue, including frank comments from the legislator about the dilemma he or she faces in making choices on the issue. One person should be designated as the principal spokesperson and you should be certain that there is agreement on the objectives to be accomplished in the meeting and on the points to be stressed.

## Other Considerations to Keep in Mind During a Personal Visit:

- Use facts to describe local impact in the legislator's district.
- Let legislators know you want to work with them.
- Be a good listener for the legislator's opinion and advice.
- Be specific; ask the legislator to support/oppose your issue.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, find out and get the information to the legislator.
- Leave fact sheets and/or position statements.
- Request follow-up.

## A Word About Legislative Staff

**Get to know your legislator's staff.** Do not be surprised or discouraged to learn that you will be meeting with a member of the legislator's staff. Often, unanticipated votes or meetings arise which will call your legislator away from a scheduled meeting. A relationship with staff members can often be as important as the one you establish with your legislator. Thank the staff whenever they have rendered assistance, such as setting up a meeting or helping you to lobby their boss. Mention them, if appropriate, in a thank you letter to the legislator after your meeting or after an important vote.

## Phone Calls

At crucial times, MTA calls upon its members to encourage immediate contact with their legislators. There is often less than 24 hours' notice before a key vote comes up in committee or even before a final vote in the Legislature. The fact that a legislator receives 20 or so calls from township officials on an issue just before a vote can make a big difference.

When a vote is coming up, it may not be possible on short notice to talk by phone with your legislator, regardless of how well you know him or her. If you can't reach the legislator, ask for the legislative aide who is assigned to your issue. If you can't reach the aide, leave your message with the person who answered the phone along with your name and address or phone number. Legislative offices do keep count of the pro and con calls on issues, so at least be certain to leave your message.

Be sure to identify yourself as a township official from the legislator's district and keep your call brief. There will be little if any time to persuade. Your message can simply be two sentences, one asking for support and the other stating why. To help you make your point succinctly, you may want to write out your message and have it in front of you when you call.

*Always be courteous and remember to thank the legislator or legislative aide for his or her time.*

## MTA Keeps You Informed!

### Publications

*Capitol Currents*

Weekly Legislative Fax

Grassroots Network

Urgent Alerts

E-News

*Michigan Township News*

### Events

Annual Conference

Summer Legislative Forum

Capitol Conference

District Meetings

# Writing Letters

One way to communicate your views to a legislator is by letter. You may write to any legislator in the state, but you will have the most influence in the legislative district where your township is located. If you have never been involved in lobbying, letter writing is a good way to ease your way into the process. Remember that a state legislator and his or her staff read hundreds of letters each week, so it is important to follow some simple guidelines.

The timing of your letter is very important. When sending letters, especially during session, your communication needs to arrive at an appropriate time and while there is still time to take effective action. MTA provides updates on bills weekly in *Legislative Fax* and monthly in *Capitol Currents*, as well as on our Web site at [www.michigantownships.org](http://www.michigantownships.org), which should help you determine appropriate timing of your communication.

In general, an effective letter is not more than two pages long. Start and end your letter by stating why you are writing and what it is you would like your legislator to do. The tone of your letter should always be professional and courteous, even when you disagree with a legislator's position, or are expressing disappointment about an action he or she took.

If MTA provides you with a sample letter, personalize it by placing it on township letterhead, adding information about how the issue affects your community. It is acceptable to use standard mail, e-mail or fax when sending your letter. Be sure to copy MTA with your letter.

Mail to state legislators should be addressed:

The Honorable *(Insert Name)*  
State Senator  
PO Box 30036  
Lansing, MI 48909-7536

The Honorable *(Insert Name)*  
State Representative  
PO Box 30014  
Lansing, MI 48909-7514

## Lobbying Through the Media

Because of the important role the media play in shaping public opinion, legislators pay special attention to issues covered by the statewide media, as well as the local media in their legislative districts. They also take note of the organizations and individuals the media quote in news stories on those issues.

There are a number of techniques for getting your message into the media—press releases, calling a reporter or editor, press conferences, letters to the editor, press interviews—but none are a sure thing! You can never be sure that your publicity efforts will produce so much as one spoken or written word on behalf of your cause, but it is important to try.

In dealings with the media, send them information only if it is truly newsworthy. You will be quickly and permanently dismissed if your so-called news is unimportant, inaccurate or untimely.

Local editorial support or opposition can be extremely helpful on many priority bills, especially for townships in key legislative districts. Consider sending local editors details on local impact or other information on bills of interest to your township. Some editors welcome byline opinion editorials by officials or will readily run editorials based on solid information you provide on the local impact of statewide or national legislation. Send copies to MTA whenever such editorials are printed.

# About the Michigan Legislature



Journals of both chambers are available online detailing the proceedings of each daily session at [www.michiganlegislature.org](http://www.michiganlegislature.org).

Records of committee action on legislation and resolutions are also available at this site.

In general, House session is held on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 1 p.m. and Thursdays at 10 a.m. Senate session usually begins at 10 a.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Each legislative session takes place during a two-year period, during which approximately 3,500 bills are introduced, of which 700-800 become law.

## How a Bill Becomes a Law

### Bill Concept

A bill concept is developed when a problem is brought to the attention of a legislator(s) and a legislative remedy is suggested. A bill is then drafted by the Legislative Service Bureau (LSB).

### Bill Introduction

Legislation is introduced in the House or Senate and assigned a number. Bill undergoes "First Reading" in the House and "First and Second Reading" in the Senate. The bill is then referred to the appropriate standing committee (17 Senate / 23 House)

### Committee Activity

If a bill is taken up in committee (not every one is) it is discussed and debated. Public hearings may be held and then the committee makes a recommendation to the full House or Senate. The committee may recommend to pass the bill, to pass the bill with amendment, to refer the bill to another committee for study, to postpone the bill indefinitely, or to send the bill to the floor for debate with no recommendation.

### Floor Action

If a bill is reported out of committee favorably or a substitute is offered, the bill is returned to the Senate or House where it receives a "General Orders" status in the Senate and "Second Reading" status in the House. The Senate resolves itself into the Committee of the Whole and the House assumes the order of "Second Reading." At this time, committee recommendations are considered and amendments may be offered and adopted. The bill then advances to "Third Reading." Under this reading, the entire bill is read unless decided otherwise by a vote of the members in the House or Senate. At this point, the bill is again subject to debate and amendment. At the conclusion of "Third Reading," the bill is either passed or defeated by a roll call vote of the majority of members elected and serving, or action may be delayed by referring the bill back to committee, postponing the bill until a specific date or tabling the bill.

### Second House

The bill then goes to the other chamber, where it may be defeated, or passed with or without amendments. If the bill is defeated, it dies. If it is passed with amendments, a conference committee must be appointed by both chambers to iron out the differences.

### Continued Legislative Action

If the bill is passed in the same form by both houses, it is ordered "enrolled" in the house in which it originated. It then goes to the Governor for consideration.

### Role of Governor

After final passage in both chambers, the bill is sent to the governor. If the governor approves, the bill is signed and it becomes a law. However, if the governor disapproves, the bill is vetoed. Should the governor not want to sign or veto the bill, it may be retained for 14 days after which time it automatically becomes a law without signature, unless the Legislature adjourns sine die (at the end of the year). If the Governor vetoes a bill while the legislature is in session or recess, the Legislature may override the veto by a 2/3 vote of the members elected and serving in both houses.

**This publication was produced by:**

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