

Expert Advice: Working with Elected Officials

Ann Gilbert has been the Executive Director of the Arkansas Transit Association since 1988 and during that time has worked directly with elected officials at the local, state and federal level on community and public transportation issues. Telling the Truth About Transit is not lobbying — the focus is really on educating and informing. And the excellent ideas Ann presents can be used in a wide variety of settings where you, as the transit leader and advocate, can inform and educate about community and public transportation. Under her guidance, the Arkansas Transit Association has grown to 246 members — one of the nation's largest and most influential state transit associations.

DigitalCT asked Ann to share her expertise on how to both establish effective working relationships with legislators and how to best communicate with them. For many community and public transportation managers and advocates, the idea of sitting across a desk from a powerful elected official is daunting. Here, Ann provides proven tactics and handy tips to make sure that those important conversations — discussions that are increasingly vital in this era of constrained local, state and federal finances — bear fruit.



The power of partnerships: Ann Gilbert (third from left) and Arkansas Transit Association members with Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe and State Representative Linda Tyler (far right) at a bill signing ceremony.

• Do your research

Learn as much as you can about the office holder (or the candidate), and try to find any agency, client or personal connection. Personal connections are a great way to establish a relationship with an elected official. One of our Arkansas Transit Association members was a close friend of a state legislator from across the state because they grew up together. When she vouched for me, I had instant trust and access. Another legislator always supported us because he had received a hand-written letter

from an elderly constituent who wrote him out of the blue praising the bus that she depended on to take her to the doctor 90 miles away.

• Know the officials before you need them

Introduce yourself – establish a rapport with them. Invite them to your agency to show the good work you do and how you help their constituents (your clients/riders). If the only time an elected official hears from you is when you need something, you're going to have a tough time achieving your goals. The best-case scenario is for the elected official, when any dis-

cussion turns to community or public transit, to think of your agency, the important work it does and the people you serve.

- **Keep it simple**

DO NOT use inside code words, initials or acronyms when explaining your programs. Elected officials generally don't know the transit industry. Using our industry jargon only widens the communications gap. Trust me, office holders appreciate someone who can take difficult-to-understand issues and simplify them. In meetings, be careful not to give a speech, but rather an organized conversation. Also, be sure to listen. It's also not a bad idea to rehearse your talking points.

- **You're still a citizen**

Many transit managers shy away from fully participating in the political process. Remember: information and education is not lobbying. Just because you work at an agency that may accept federal, state and local government funding doesn't mean you lose your rights as an American citizen. If you're able, make a personal campaign contribution; it doesn't have to be large – explain your agency can't contribute (as non-profit or government entity) but that you want to help. It's also vital to attend legislative committee, city council, county council, etc., meetings to see and be seen.

- **Stay current on key issues**

Be aware of issues and communicate their effects both on your agency and on their constituents. If you've established a good working relationship, this type of information will be valued by the elected official and staff members, and will likely start a conversation on the issue.

- **Constituents matter most**

A letter, e-mail, phone call or visit from someone who votes in their district always trumps one from someone who doesn't.

- **Provide cover on tough legislative issues**

Give office holders cover by asking for their support and explaining the reasons, especially on tax or funding legislation. Local support will justify their position.

- **Be helpful and prepared**

I've found it useful to prepare a synopsis describing an issue and its effects that you can give the officials — but please no more than one page. Make it simple and easy to read. Explain any opposition's position; acknowledge their argument up-front so you can spin it to your advantage. Never let the elected official be surprised by the opposing views and arguments.

- **Develop and work with partners**

Reach out to coalition partners who share your goals (these may change depending on the issue). Choose wisely -- know what kind of relationship they have with the elected official. Coordinate your strategy development and keep partners in the loop.

- **Always tell the truth**

Your credibility is your best asset, so always tell the truth. You'll only get one chance to lie to an elected official – afterwards, your credibility is shot no matter what the issue. Don't be afraid to answer a question saying, "I don't know." If you don't know the answer, be sure to find out and get that information back to the official as soon as possible.

- **Don't burn your bridges**

Never burn bridges if the official doesn't support a particular issue. There may be other valid and compelling reasons why that's the case, and you'll need their help again in the future.

- **Be respectful and polite**

Always remember to thank elected officials for their support and help. Often, they get criticism for their issue stands – but they rarely get enough credit for their good work. **CT**