

How to Make a Visit to Your Elected Official Successful

It is important to realize the impact that local contact has on elected officials. When policymakers hear from constituents, it gets their attention. As a matter of fact, the strongest message is the one that comes from you. Be sure to exercise your right to educate officials about the issues affecting you and your business, and make your voice heard with officials at the local, state and federal levels. It is essential to have a concise and organized plan for your visit with a policymaker.

Scheduling the Meeting

Keep in mind that you do not need to wait until a specific bill is under consideration to meet with your elected officials. As previously noted, you should develop relationships with these individuals before an urgent matter develops. Elected officials make meeting with their constituents a top priority. However, due to the large amounts of requests these offices receive, most policymakers have their own process for scheduling meetings and answering correspondence from constituents. The vast majority of these offices prefer meetings to be scheduled by e-mail or phone. Security procedures can significantly increase the length of time a traditional piece of mail takes to reach an elected official's office. As a result, most offices will provide a more prompt response through e-mails and phone calls. Regardless of the form of contact you choose for your elected official's office, be sure to include your name, employer, address, date(s) of availability, contact information and the requested topic of the meeting (even if it is an introductory meeting).

During the Meeting

Arrive early to your meeting. Security lines through any government building can vary drastically. Also, if your elected official or the official's staff is running either ahead of or behind schedule, be prepared and flexible about the meeting time. You may meet with a staffer from your representative's office. Knowing the staff is critical to a successful relationship with any official. Much of the work in a government office is performed by the dedicated and talented staffers, so don't underestimate their importance. Your meeting may be scheduled for approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Be prepared, speak clearly, stay on message, discuss the importance of the issue you are advocating and make sure to clearly state any specific request that you may have for the office.

After the Meeting

After your meeting, make sure you send a thank-you note to your elected official's office for the visit. Also, if the official asked questions to which answers were not readily available, make sure to include any follow-up information in this communication (whether hardcopy letter or e-mail). Finally, to help you make a personal impression that is vastly different from the dozens of professional lobbyists and grassroots organizations visiting an office, extend an invitation for the official to visit your facility.

Ongoing Communication

Now that you have established contact with your elected official, it is important to keep the relationship alive and nurture it over time. Continue to provide periodic updates to your representative and staff on any additional information related to issues, the industry or your company as it is released.

Before Your Meeting

Develop a list of officials and staff contacts for each office you want to meet. (This list should include the chief of staff, scheduler and the legislative assistant assigned to your issue of area (i.e., transportation). Develop an Issue Briefing Packet, which includes background materials to provide to your staffer or member during your meeting. When preparing the packet, make sure to include:

- An introduction to your company
- Examples of general aviation's impact to your local economy
- Issues of importance to you

Call or e-mail the office and schedule a meeting. Do not be concerned if you have to wait to receive confirmation of a specific time and date of your meeting. These offices often hold periodic scheduling meetings to process constituent meeting requests. Call and confirm one week prior to the meeting.

During Your Meeting

Be prompt and arrive early. Stick to your talking points and only cover one or two of the most important issues to you. Be sure to emphasize your company, number of employees and local economic impact. Be sure to hand out your Issue Briefing Packet and business cards before you begin the meeting. Ask for your elected official's support of your issue, but do not make demands. Feel free to have an open and honest discussion of issues, but do not argue with the official or staff members. Ask for business cards and thank them for the opportunity to meet.

After Your Meeting

Send a thank-you letter (or e-mail) to each of the representatives or staffers you met with during your visit. If you have any follow-up items, such as answers to questions you did not know during your meeting, make sure you provide those answers with your thank-you note. Periodically keep in touch with your representative's office, feel free to share any relevant press releases and media articles of potential interest, or at the very least, send thank-you notes when they accomplish legislative landmarks to encourage the success of the general industry. Invite your local representative or staffer to visit your facility.