

TRUSTEE TOPICS

Prepared by the
Kansas State Library and the
Kansas Library Trustee Association

LIBRARY ADVOCACY

GOAL:

The goal of this article is to help library trustees build support for libraries by using the political process.

BACKGROUND:

It is essential for trustees to be knowledgeable about the political process and to learn the art of advocating for library service. Trustees need to cultivate relationships with local, state and national officials and work with them to increase support for libraries.

Lobbying is the process of expressing opinions to the decision makers and supporting those opinions with hard evidence. It provides an excellent opportunity for trustees to use their knowledge and experience to work for better public libraries. Trustees and Friends are particularly important to library advocacy because they are citizen advocates. Legislators are not particularly surprised to find that librarians support libraries. They have occasionally been surprised at the groundswell of citizen support that an effective library program can muster.

Libraries sometimes feel that it is hard for them to compete with other essential services. But they do have a very broad, if not always deeply tapped, base of citizen support. There is also a large overlap between active library users and informed voters. Legislators are well aware of this. Citizen support for libraries can be built, not overnight but through a long-term program of persistent effort.

It is not a task that trustees have to do alone. Others in the community will be willing to support library issues if you provide them with the facts and let them know you need their help.

All Kansas boards need to be aware of proposed legislation on local, state and national levels that may have an impact on library service.

Section I – Tips on the Art of Lobbying:

- Credibility is crucial. Approach officials when you have a clear purpose to accomplish. Anticipate questions and be prepared with evidence to back your position.
- Focus on the facts. Prepare a simple fact sheet to give to elected officials. Use testimonials only to effectively back other arguments.
- Represent the local point of view. Explain how a proposal will affect the library and the voters in the community.
- Be considerate and polite. Hostile or negative behavior is invariably counterproductive.
- Know the status of legislation that affects you and be prepared to respond quickly.
- Build coalitions with others who share your concerns: library users, Friends, business people, teachers, retirees.
- Don't assume that your communications cannot be effective. Ten personal letters or phone calls on an issue is an avalanche. Twenty is a rebellion.
- Respect the opinions of elected officials. Thank them for their consideration even when they don't agree with your position.
- Make a point to thank an elected official who supports your position.

- Use correct titles, correct addresses, correctly spelled names in all written or electronic communications. Avoid form letters.
- Make appointments with elected officials. Invite them to lunch or sponsor special occasions to share your concerns.
- Send newsletters and articles of special interest. Don't wait for a crisis to make an initial contact.
- Support legislators who support libraries. Give money or campaign for them. At the very least, vote for them. Don't take their support for granted but keep them informed on what is happening.

[Adapted from the *Utah State Library Public Library Trustee Handbook*, 1993 p26]

Section II – Tips on the Art of Testifying

If you are ever called upon to testify before a legislative committee, you might find this tip sheet prepared by Lisa Kinney, a former Wyoming Senator, very helpful:

- Keep your comments reasonably succinct. Don't ramble.
- Answer questions as often as necessary. Legislators find it difficult to read, listen and think at the same time, though this is a job skill they build as time goes on.
- Don't be arrogant, sarcastic or rude. A legislator may be ignorant on a specific issue but they are not dumb.
- Don't lie. A decision maker puts his or her own reputation on the line when they agree to sponsor a bill or amendment for you. If you pad the budget, forget to include essential information or are not honest about problems, the decision maker can be placed in an embarrassing position and lose trust in you.

- Don't address your remarks to decision makers of one gender or one political party more than another.
- Be positive, not pouty. To be successful in legislation, you may have to lose several times. Don't allow anger or discouragement to show. Don't develop a reputation for being critical of public figures.
- Don't be afraid to consider alternatives. Legislators know the political realities and may have good ideas on strategies to solve problems. Remain flexible as you discuss options.
- If a legislator opposes your position, don't reprimand him or ignore him. You can thank an opponent for his consideration of an issue whenever there is a natural opportunity to do so. An opponent on one issue may be supporter on another.
- Write a thank-you note to the chair of the committee that expresses your appreciation of the opportunity to testify.

SOURCES:

This material was adapted by Senator Lisa Kinney from her book, *Lobby for Your Library: Know What Works*, Chapter Six, American Library Association, 1992. It is used with the permission of the author.

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