

Keeping Grassroots From Turning Brown

By Jeremy Elrod

One of the most effective tools in being heard by public officials is one of the most difficult to grow and maintain: grassroots lobbying. When legislators hear from their constituents, legislators know they are hearing from the people that voted them into office, and who can vote them out of office. The best weapon against an army of lobbyists is an army of folks from “back home” making their voice heard.

Grassroots lobbying is simply citizens participating in their government, joined by a common goal, with a desire to have their voices heard. The most important characteristics for effective grassroots are passion for an issue, a willingness to act, and a persistence to not give up. It can be more effective when it's organized, but it's not required. Most of all, relationships between public officials and their constituents can be the most decisive factor.

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Like most people, the people and opinions legislators hear the most often sway them. A good relationship with a legislator means the legislator will listen when an important issue comes up. However, a legislator should not only hear from someone when they want something. It's simply human nature the voice of someone you know well will be listened to more than someone you don't know as well. This means getting to know legislators before important issues comes up.

How does you develop a good relationship with a legislator or public official? Basically, by putting in the effort to regularly communicate with them and getting to know them. This can include attending meetings a legislator is hosting or will be at, visiting them at their office, or inviting them to attend events or meetings you may be facilitating. Legislators can be very busy with not much down time, so they appreciate when someone offers to help with an issue or situation. Swapping contact information is also important so the legislator can contact you once the legislator knows your role in the community and a good relationship develops. It also allows you to contact the legislator when an issue comes up that is important to you that you want your voice heard on.

Just like your own yard, grassroots needs regular tending to and maintenance. Checking in with legislators, updating them on things that are going on, or seeing if you can be of any assistance means a lot to representatives and senators. In person visits or phone calls are most effective, but with busy schedules emails and texts can be useful too. Routine communication is the key, and sometimes as long as you regularly communicate with your legislator it doesn't matter how it's done.

One of the most illustrative phrases in the legislative environment is, “If you're not at the table, you're on the menu.” Being in touch with your legislator regularly can help insure you at place at the table, and even sometimes the legislator makes sure you're invited. This is only possible with a strong grassroots effort, and getting to know your legislators. Sometimes all the lobbying in Nashville can be greatly enhanced (or defeated) with just one or two calls from “back home,” with legislators hearing

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from someone from the community. On tough issues, grassroots lobbying can oftentimes mean the difference in whether a bill gets passed or killed. If legislators are going to hear from someone, many times the best person to hear from is you.