

**Tips on Effectively Working with Congress (government relations/lobbying)**  
by  
**John Peterson, VASWCD Legislative Committee Co-Chairman**  
**Chairman, Director No. VA SWCD**

**Introduction:** In the 40+ years I have been privileged to work on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC with Members of Congress, Congressional staffs, cabinet agencies, and professional lobbyists, I have been compiling helpful tips picked up from several sources. Those sources are as varied as the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), the Portland Cement Association (PCA), the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), and Congressional Members. As VASWCD and SWCD's are involved with government relations, these tips are worth sharing. They are important not only for VASWCD's Board Members, but also for individual SWCD Directors who may have reason to contact legislators at any level, federal, state, or local. While they are specific to the U.S. Congress, they are just as useful when working with state legislators and local officials.

1. **Don't underestimate legislators.** With rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent, and want to do the right thing. Your role is to inform them on what you think is right.
2. **Be understanding.** Put yourself in your legislator's place. Try to understand their constituent's positions, their outlooks, and their goals. Then you are more likely to persuade them to adopt your position.
3. **Be practical.** Recognize that each legislator has commitments. Do not unduly chastise a legislator if they happen to vote against one of your issues. This does not mean they have deserted your whole program. Give legislators the benefit of the doubt. They will appreciate and remember that you did.
4. **Be informed.** Never meet with legislators to advocate a position without first mastering all the facts on it, and the arguments for and against.
5. **Be a good opponent.** Fight issues, not persons. Be ready with alternatives and solutions as well as with criticisms. This is constructive opposition.
6. **Do not run down the opposition.** Name calling, or derogatory remarks do not win friends and influence legislation.
7. **Do not assume each legislator is a walking encyclopedia on every pending issue.** Each session of Congress or your State Legislature sees thousands of bills introduced and passed. In my Commonwealth of Virginia in 2004, 3,006 different bills and resolutions were introduced, and 1,715 passed by the General Assembly. That is a lot of legislation to read and remember. It is impossible for every legislator to know every bill, chapter, and verse.
8. **Do not talk without the facts.** Smoke and mirrors will not do the job in winning a legislator over. You must demonstrate, through tangible evidence supported by facts, that a particular action is both desirable and justified. Couch your arguments in long term investments. Discuss cost effectiveness and efficiency.
9. **Do not forget there is always another side to the issue.** Each VA State Representative has an average of 71,000 constituents (2004), and each Federal Representative about 700,000. It is even more for Senators. You can be sure that

- there is at least one of their constituents who have a different position on your issue, and like you expect to have their voice heard.
10. **Do not expect commitment on the spot.** Most legislators are thoughtful and deliberate, who make a point of seeking all sides of an issue before taking a position. This does not mean that you should fail to ensure they know what you would like them to do, be specific. Good politicians check the depth of the water before diving in.
  11. **Be reasonable.** Recognize that legitimate differences of opinion exist. Never indulge in threats. Remember that friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.
  12. **Never break a promise.** This is a cardinal rule of politics. If you tell a legislator you will do something, then do it. No excuses. Keep your word. Keep all commitments and promises in a timely manner.
  13. **Learn to evaluate and weigh issues.** Many bills which are introduced “by request” are never intended to become law. So, do not criticize legislators for bills introduced, and do not call out the “troops” until you are sure a bill you oppose is serious.
  14. **Do not change horses in the middle of the stream.** Never leave legislators out on a limb supporting your issue, and then change your position after they have publicly supported a position you asked them to take.
  15. **Be realistic.** Remember that controversial legislation or regulations usually result in compromise. It has always been so and will always be in our Constitutional Republic. Like it or not, compromise is the language of politics.
  16. **Do not burn your bridges when you do not win.** Working with legislators is an investment that may not pay off immediately. Do not burn your bridges if the results you want are not immediately forthcoming.
  17. **Be thoughtful.** Commend the things your legislators do that you support. They may not even be your main issues. That is the way you would like to be treated. Lawmakers will tell you they get dozens of letters asking them to do something, but very few thanking them for what they have done.
  18. **Be friendly.** Do not contact legislators only when you want their help. Invite them to attend your organization’s meeting when they are back in their district to say “thank you” and discuss issues. Take pains to stay in touch with them throughout the year – every year.
  19. **Do not fail to say “thank you.”** Even though meeting with constituents comes with the territory for legislators, it is still an act that should be acknowledged. A thank you is always in order and appreciated.
  20. **Do not leave never to be heard from again.** One phone call or visit is not enough. Stay on top of developments relating to your issue so that when new and relevant information becomes available, you can pass it along.

One final thought – **be sure of what you ask for. You might just get it!** There is another adage that is appropriate for VASWCD and SWCD Directors, **“Your influence counts – but only if you exercise it.”**