

Organizing Toolbox 2005

General Assembly 101

Here are some tools to help you better communicate with your legislator

by Sue Rafferty

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According to the Center for Civic Education, a representative democracy is a system of government in which power is held by the people and exercised indirectly through elected representatives. We sometimes forget that in order for a representative democracy to work the people must continuously communicate with their elected representatives. This task can be successfully accomplished by following a few simple tips.

“Our children should learn the general framework of their government and then they should know where they come in contact with the government, where it touches their daily lives and where their influence is exerted on the government. It must not be a distant thing, someone else’s business, but they must see how every cog in the wheel of a democracy is important and bears its share of responsibility for the smooth running of the entire machine.” — Eleanor Roosevelt

Legislators and other elected officials look to their constituents for support and direction. You are the very individuals who placed them in elected office in the first place and you are the ones who will either return them to office or vote to elect their opponents. Keeping in touch is also important because elected officials need direction from the voters. They need to know what is on your mind and what is important to you. Many times it is the individual citizen that alerts her legislator to a problem or an issue. Sometimes this needs to be addressed by proposing new legislation. Jefferson’s concept of the citizen-legislator demands frequent interaction with the public.

In a time of mass communication and instant messaging, contacting your legislator would seem a simple task — you can write a letter, e-mail or phone. Legislators are constantly in the public eye both in Richmond during the legislative session and at local farmers’ markets, civic associations and other public gatherings. So, how can you best communicate with your legislator?

Tips for effective communications

- Be sure you are contacting the legislator that represents you. Check the legislature's website <http://house.state.va.us> and click on "Who is my legislator?" to find out who represents you in the House of Delegates and the Virginia Senate.
- Be sure to plan out the letter or e-mail you are sending. Resist the temptation to give a laundry list of problems or issues that concern you. Discuss only one issue or problem per letter or e-mail.
- Be sure to limit your discussion to one bill per letter or e-mail. If you want to discuss more than one bill be sure these bills all concern the same issue or problem. If you know the number of the bill please include it (e.g., HB1500). In any given Session more than 3,000 bills may be introduced. Having the bill number helps identify the exact text. Tell the legislator why you support, or don't support a particular bill. Be specific, tell her how the bill would affect you, your family or your community.
- Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent immediately. "As your constituent I am writing you to share my views on HB1500." Or, "Having lived in Abingdon for more than 10 years, I feel . . ." This alerts the reader to your status as a constituent. Especially during the rush of business during the legislative session, it is important to single out constituents as a priority. During the "long session" in even numbered years (i.e., 2006) the entire two-year state budget is under consideration. In a typical day during a long session, a legislator may receive more than 200 e-mails and many letters. It is important for the legislative staff to prioritize.
- Be sure to include your name, address and telephone number in your e-mail or letter. Print your name and address clearly. Every year we are not able to respond to dozens of letters because the return address is missing or the name cannot be read. We even try to use the phone book and reverse directories to find the correct addresses of some constituents. Because we may receive so many e-mails every day, we do not regularly respond to e-mails where we cannot be sure that the writer is a constituent.
- Be sure to send the letter to the correct address. Again, go to the website (<http://house.state.va.us>) and find the address listed. During the legislative session (January, February and the first two weeks of March — in even years) letters should be sent to the Richmond address. When the legislature is not in session, send letters to the legislator's home office address. E-mails can be sent to the same address year-round. Again, check the website for e-mail addresses (e.g., del_eisenberg@house.state.va.us).
- Be sure to call ahead if you plan to visit your delegate or senator during session in Richmond. You may have to settle for the delegate's legislative assistant because the delegate may be in committee meetings or on the House Floor for most of the day. You can call Richmond and make an appointment.
- Be sure to visit your legislator while she (or he) is in the home district. Again, you may find legislators' district office phone numbers on the legislative website. Visiting during the time that the legislator is not in session is frequently much easier and more relaxed.
- Be sure to call your legislator and tell him about your concerns or about your views on particular legislation. During the session you may call the Constituent

Viewpoint Hotline — a toll free number (1-804-889-0229) — and share your views with your delegate or senator.

- Be sure to contact your legislator if you have a problem dealing with a state agency or department (e.g., Department of Taxation or Department of Motor Vehicles). Sometimes the legislator or her staff can help you resolve a problem or answer a question.
- Be sure to remember that it is your right to voice your opinion and share your thoughts with your legislator.

NOTE: The Virginia General Assembly meets in Richmond. Session begins on the second Wednesday in January. While the Capitol Building is undergoing restoration the House of Delegates will meet in the east wing of the Old State Library (now called the Patrick Henry Building) just north of the Capitol. The Senate will meet in the west wing of the Patrick Henry Building. “Short sessions” are in odd-numbered years and usually last 46 days. “Long sessions” meet in even years (such as 2006) and usually last 60 days. The Constitution of Virginia allows the Legislature to extend any session by no more than 30 days.

Resources and Brief Facts:

- Legislative Website: <http://house.state.va.us>
- Constituent Viewpoint Toll Free Hotline (during Session only) 1-800-889-0229
- Phone numbers and addresses of legislators – see legislative website
- Who is my Legislator? – see homepage of legislative website
- Bill tracking – see homepage of legislative website

Practical strategies to increase affordable housing at the local level

by Dave Norris

There's a housing crisis in many Virginia communities that's forcing thousands of families to make some very difficult choices:

- Work two or three jobs to afford the rent, or be around for the kids.
- Move to a less expensive area to afford to buy a house, or keep renting in an expensive location and stay close to one's job, family, faith community, school, and services.
- Move into a crowded house with relatives, or renew the lease on a dilapidated and unsafe (yet overpriced) apartment.
- Sleep in the car night after night, or check into a homeless shelter — assuming one exists that isn't already filled to capacity.

Local community groups can do many things to address the affordable housing problem at the local level. Here are some strategies that work.

1. More than 350 cities, counties and states have now established local Housing Trust Funds to help underwrite the costs of constructing affordable housing. These funds are typically focused on meeting the housing needs of the working poor, low-income elderly, disabled, and homeless. These folks are by far the most vulnerable to the kinds of housing pressures brought about in hot urban and suburban real estate markets, and in rural areas where large-scale development is getting underway for the first time. Organize a group to ask city or county government to help set up a Housing Trust Fund. One way that localities can capitalize on a Housing Trust Fund is to dedicate a small portion of their property tax revenues (the Washington Regional Network for Livable Communities suggests 2 cents for every \$100 of assessed value) for the development of affordable housing. You've heard of "One Percent for Art"— how about "Two Cents for Housing"?
2. Hundreds of localities across the country have adopted Inclusionary Zoning ordinances that mandate or provide incentives to include affordable units in new housing developments. The focus on construction of exclusive, upper-income housing developments in many parts of Virginia squeezes out lower-income and even middle-income buyers and renters. At the very least, any time a high-end housing developer approaches a city council or county board for a taxpayer subsidy, special zoning variance, or road improvement, the local government has the right and obligation to require that a certain percentage of affordable units be included in that development plan.
It's a sad commentary on public priorities that this does not already happen as a matter of course, but local community groups can be very effective in making inclusionary zoning a practice of local government. Local governments can also adopt a whole range of incentives to make voluntary inclusion an attractive option

- for developers who see the wisdom in ensuring that the working families who make communities function can afford to live in them. An effective Inclusionary Zoning ordinance backed up by a substantial Housing Trust Fund would provide a powerful one-two punch for the expansion of affordable housing options in many communities and whole regions of the state.
3. Press for a Living Wage (or better yet, a Housing Wage) for all local workers so they can keep up with the rising costs of rental housing and afford to save to eventually buy a home if they want one.
 4. Organize to get planning authorities and local elected bodies to adopt progressive guidelines for redevelopment. Community revitalization initiatives need to improve the living conditions of the existing residents of low-income neighborhoods, not make their lives more difficult due to the poisonous creep of gentrification. Gentrification means attracting higher-income people to an area and pushing lower-income people out. In tight housing markets, there's no place nearby for lower-income people to relocate, exacerbating homelessness, unemployment, and over-crowded living conditions as increasing numbers of people share living arrangements in order to keep a roof over their heads.
 5. Voice your support for expanding the availability of local rental assistance programs so that the thousands of local families on waiting lists for such programs can finally get some help with their soaring housing costs.
 6. Charter a neighborhood based Community Development Corporation to engage the leadership of low-income residents in efforts to enhance housing and economic opportunities in their neighborhoods. If a local housing authority wants to tear down existing public housing and build something new and improved in its place, for instance, it should start by working with existing residents to form a Community Development Corporation to lead the way.
 7. Constructing or converting existing property into supportive housing/Single Room Occupancy units for the homeless helps stabilize neighborhoods with serious homelessness problems. Faith communities, local business groups, and other community organizations can sponsor new supportive housing units for the most marginalized people.
 8. Scrutinize, question, and assert the need for adequate housing development plans when local institutions and businesses expand. Colleges and universities need to provide adequate housing for students and employees. Companies that build major new facilities in undeveloped areas need to work with local planning agencies to make sure that affordable housing development will keep up with job and population growth. Local governments can reduce barriers that prevent more homeowners from making accessory apartments available to renters, as well.

Dave Norris is former Chairman, Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority Board of Commissioners and current Executive Director, PACEM, a faith-based homeless shelter program in Charlottesville.

Voter Registration

Coming right on the heels of the national elections in 2004, Virginia is one of only two states with a statewide election this year. The offices of Governor, Lt. Governor, and Attorney General, as well as all 100 seats in the House of Delegates are up for election in November 2005. Virginia also has one of the lowest voter-turnout records in the nation. So this year, VOP especially encourages all Virginians to vote, and to start thinking now about how to improve voter turnout in your community this November. For these reasons, we are re-printing a Voter Registration Toolbox article from April 2000.

Anyone active in groups working on community issues eventually comes face-to-face with elected or appointed government officials.

Local, state and federal government provide public services — roads, schools, sewers, fire and police protection — and determine policies that shape private practices — zoning, industrial and residential development, and employment practices, to name a few. Elected officials, and those appointed by elected officials, make decisions that affect our personal lives and the general well-being of our communities.

Even though government shapes so much of our lives, most people don't vote.

Joy Johnson, chairperson of PHAR (Public Housing Association of Residents), a VOP affiliate in Charlottesville, says that the biggest challenge to encouraging people to register to vote is connecting the act of voting to people's real lives.

“It's easier to find information on how to play the lottery than it is to find out what voting has to do with the things you care about in your life. Television and radio tell you over and over again what you stand to win if you buy a lottery ticket; how many times have you seen an ad that says if you want to save affordable housing in your neighborhood, improve the schools, or increase the minimum wage, you need to vote? I've seen city council meetings and committee meetings in the General Assembly where the votes of two or three elected officials make all the difference in whether a proposal passes or gets killed. Any effort to register voters needs to include education on how the people we elect determine the outcome on schools, economics, jobs, affordable housing, and the other things real people care about in our everyday lives.”

PHAR began last year to educate public housing residents in Charlottesville on how electoral politics has a direct impact on their lives, and to register people to vote.

“If you want to do a voter registration drive, call your local Registrar of Voters and get the applications and other information you need. The League of Women Voters will train your members to register people if you need help. But plan to do education work, too,

because most unregistered people aren't automatically going to want to fill out applications or vote," said Joy.

Most people think that politicians don't care about them, and the complicated rules of party politics serve to exclude many people from participating in partisan politics. But non-partisan voter participation — encouraging people to register, questioning candidates from all parties on where they stand on issues you care about, and getting people to go to the polls, can make a difference. Both the outcome of local elections and the actions of candidates once they are elected can be shaped by new voters holding candidates accountable for their positions and actions on issues.

Joy recommends the following steps for a local group that wants to begin a non-partisan voter registration drive:

Do some advertising first

Put up posters or send flyers in your community letting people know how voting is connected with things they care about in their own lives — affordable housing, schools, jobs, road construction, etc. Announce your voter registration drive.

Get registration forms and other materials from the local Registrar of Voters

Application forms need to be filled out completely and accurately, or the Registrar can't enter the registration. So be prepared to help anyone who has trouble completing the form, and check applications to see they are complete before turning them in to the Registrar. Local Registrars can also provide you with brochures with information on registration and voting procedures, or you can obtain them directly from the State Board of Elections in Richmond (1-800-552-9745) People can register to vote at any time during the year, but in order to vote in an upcoming election, you must register at least 29 days before the election. Voters must be U.S. citizens, residents of Virginia, and at least 18 years old; 17-year-olds can register if they will be 18 by the next general election.

People who have been convicted of felonies must have their voting rights restored by the Governor before they can register. Contact the Secretary of the Commonwealth, P.O. Box 2454, Richmond, VA 23201-2454 to apply. People who have been judged mentally incompetent by a circuit court must apply to the court for reinstatement of competency before being able to register.

Hold a training session for your members who will commit to registering voters

Walk people through the steps of registering people (the League of Women Voters is usually willing to help with this if you need it.)

Ask members to practice talking about how voting connects with what is going on in the community — talk about the local political arena and how it affects both personal and community life. Members will have to talk to unregistered people and help them see that

registering and voting can make a difference, so practice (role-play) having conversations with people who don't see what difference it makes. Try to connect the need to vote to a long-term view of history. Joy said, "Martin Luther King encouraged people to vote. What difference did it make then? What kinds of changes came about during the Civil Rights Movement? What kinds of things do we need to change now? How can exercising our right to vote have an impact on jobs, housing, education?"

Use a two-pronged approach to reach unregistered voters

- Go door-to-door in pairs contacting unregistered voters. Leave an application and come back later to pick it up; check to make sure the application is complete.
- Hold an event — a social event like a picnic or pizza party — where people can register and talk to each other at the same time. It's also possible to set up a voter registration table at community events — after church services on Sunday, high school sporting events, etc. Contact the church or organization sponsoring the event to make arrangements.

Evaluate what you learned in doing the voter registration drive and consider future efforts

Ask members to reflect on what they learned from their efforts to register voters. What worked best and what needs to be improved? How else can the group encourage people to participate in electing public officials? Some groups hold non-partisan candidate forums during election season to ask candidates where they stand on issues of concern to their members. Others hold accountability sessions with elected officials at various times during the year to ask them to account for how they've acted on community concerns. Some groups call all the people they registered just before the next election to remind them to go to the polls and vote for the candidates of their choice.

Non-profit tax-exempt groups must be non-partisan

Non-profit organizations exempt from taxes under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code cannot endorse or contribute to campaigns for candidates for office, and cannot work for specific candidates or groups of candidates. A good manual for organizations exempt under Sections 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) of the tax code is: *Playing by the Rules: Handbook on Voter Participation and Education Work for 501(c)(3) Organizations*. It's available from the Independent Sector, 1200 Eighteenth Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20036 (888) 860-8118.

As individuals, people can of course support any candidate they choose. The point of non-partisan voter participation is not to endorse specific candidates, but to hold all candidates and elected officials accountable to what Joy calls "the real needs in real people's lives."