

Working with Your Legislators – a Year-Round Job –

Local leaders play a crucial role in educating state legislators on how the actions they take at the General Assembly will affect communities. During General Assembly sessions, VML often calls on local leaders to communicate their reasons for opposition to, or support of, specific legislation. Local leaders often make the critical difference as VML seeks to curtail bills that weaken local authority and to support bills that benefit localities. Your input during sessions has been, and will continue to be, important.



However, it remains true that the best time to engage your legislators is when they are *not* in Richmond. Your locality’s voice on issues is more likely to be heard *before* the work of turning those issues into legislation begins. Indeed, the limitations imposed by the pandemic – which make it even more difficult to engage legislators during General Assembly sessions – have made the need for year-round engagement more important than ever.

So, what can you do to make sure your representatives arrive in Richmond fully aware of what matters to your community? Here are the things you should do year-round to ensure that your community’s voice is heard.

Build relationships

One of the most important things you can do is build relationships – both with your legislators and with partners in your community. The relationships you cultivate and the effort you put into building them will facilitate a stronger partnership between your locality and the state. VML has some suggestions on how to build these relationships:

Legislative Outreach

Use the time between sessions to meet with legislators and familiarize them with local issues. When meeting with them, be sure to:

- Ask how they prefer to be contacted and share your contact information with them.
- Get to know the legislative aides; they are valuable sources of information.
- Schedule meetings throughout the year to discuss issues affecting your locality.
- Invite your legislators to site visits – seeing programs and services firsthand will make a stronger and more lasting impression.
- Tell your legislators specifically what you want from them.
- Give specific examples of how actions by the state influence your budget and tax rates – positively or negatively.

Even brief interactions can pay big dividends!

Community Outreach

Ensure that other local leaders, organizations, and citizens are engaged and understand how state actions can impact their focus area. Together you can:

- Provide feedback on your legislators’ decisions – good and bad.
- Publicly thank legislators who have helped your locality to be successful.
- Publicly acknowledge the need for state programs and funding at civic meetings, and openly share what you need from your legislators.
- Build coalitions to support your locality’s legislative issues.
- Work with your neighboring communities and Planning District Commissions (PDCs) on shared concerns.

Partnerships can have more influence than the sum of their parts!



Develop a local legislative agenda

A simple yet effective way to get your legislators' attention is to develop a clear legislative agenda for your locality. When thinking about an agenda:

- Include capital needs along with policy priorities. Even if the two items fall under different budget categories, you will want both addressed during the session.
- Refer to the [VML Legislative Program](#) and incorporate relevant provisions where your interests align with others across the state – there is power in numbers!
- Make it public. Post it on your locality's website and incorporate it into your broader media strategy.

Engage with legislators year-round

Fall:

- Attend VML's Annual Conference in October and the legislative committee meeting.
- Adopt your locality's legislative agenda and share it publicly with media and legislators.
- Meet with your legislators and ask how you can support them with information and connections to resources that support your local issues.

Winter:

- The General Assembly Session begins on the second Wednesday in January (January 13, 2021).
- Stay in contact with your legislators. Before session ask them the most effective way to communicate with them and use it often.
- Schedule at least one visit or call with your legislators during session; VML is happy to participate in these meetings. Remember that the relationship you cultivated over the interim will lead to a stronger partnership and more communication between you and your legislators during the session.
- Stay engaged with VML and your neighbor localities to stay informed about what happens during session that affects your region directly.
- If you aren't already a subscriber, sign up for [VML's newsletter eNews](#) to receive alerts about committee meetings, bills and actions to support the VML legislative agenda.
- Attend VML's General Assembly activities and budget updates.

Spring:

- Publicly thank legislators who supported local issues.
- Hold legislators accountable if they failed to support local issues.
- Attend one or more of VML's wrap-up events to discuss the recent session and interact with your colleagues.

Summer:

- Join one of [VML's six Policy Committees](#) to familiarize yourself with statewide issues.
- Educate your community about what your legislators can do to help your locality and encourage them to get involved.
- Set up meetings with legislators and candidates, invite them on tours of your locality's programs and services, and tell them about the challenges your community faces.



VML is your resource. Use it!

VML is available throughout the year to help with your locality's legislative needs. For assistance with developing a legislative agenda, crafting draft legislation, building key talking points, or other issues, contact your VML lobbying team.



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