

Building and Maintaining Relationships With Elected Officials

Relationships with elected officials and other civic leaders are key to:

- Developing and maintaining support for your Main Street Program
- Executing the plans and projects in your district that need public, municipal and/or legislative support

Whether you are connecting with local, state or federal officials, use the tips below to initiate conversations and foster long-term engagement with Main Street organizations, goals and projects.

First Steps

Identify your Elected Officials

If you are unsure who represents you and how to contact them, use an online tool to identify all your elected officials and their basic contact information.

- [Official Election Results: Montana Secretary of State's Office](#)
- [Montana Legislature](#)
- County government pages
- City/town government pages
- [Montana League of Cities and Towns](#)

Tip: Contact or copy staff members, such as a field representative or an in-person state publication coordinator, on your outreach emails. Call the office to confirm the contact information of the individuals responsible for scheduling or the staff associated with economic development or preservation issues.

Leverage Connections: Are members of your board, donors or other local leaders connected to an elected official? An introductory email from someone with an existing relationship with an elected official can help initiate a conversation.

Initiate the Conversation

Before you reach out, craft your message. The most effective approach will depend on your specific goals or intentions. For example:

- A brief email is appropriate when requesting a meeting or drawing attention to an issue.
- A phone call is an effective way to register your support for a bill or request co-sponsorship.
- Letters are sometimes appropriate to outline the details of your request, but regular mail can slow response times. Consider emailing your letters as PDF attachments.

If you don't get a response, send polite follow-ups and/or expand your outreach. For example: If you reached out by email, try a follow-up phone call.

Once a relationship is initiated, consider the following do's and don'ts of maintaining it:

Do's

- Always be prepared, persistent and polite. It's the job of elected officials to listen and respond to their constituents.
- Pre-plan meetings with your team to understand speaking roles and timing.
- Approach meetings and/or outreach with data, specific examples, etc.
- Invite elected officials and staff to district events.
- Attend town halls, commission/council meetings and other forums in which the official is hosting or participating.
- Acknowledge their contributions and support.

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- Send your newsletters and annual reports to remind them of your accomplishments.
- Be flexible; schedules change frequently.
- Remember that both officials and positions can and do change. A “no” is rarely final.

Don'ts

- Exaggerate or state more than you know. It's OK to say, “I'll find out and get back to you.”
- Be intimidated.
- Become defensive or argumentative.
- Ignore staff members; staff are an invaluable resource.
- Lose focus on the issue at hand due to other political issues. Remember, you're representing your organization, not your personal interests. Pull the conversation back to the issue if needed.
- Surprise or embarrass the official, particularly in public forums.
- Become discouraged. Relationship building is a long-term strategy.