

What is a constituent?

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Even though I've been in political hibernation for the last twenty years, I've become politically active again thanks to some old dogs who never gave up on me. I was thinking that I just might have something to share with those of you who are hesitant to jump into politics.

It's important to remember that we live in a republic, not a democracy. Public officials are elected as community representatives, but are under no real obligation to do so. But then, if elected officials don't know how we DO feel about all kinds of community issues, then how can we blame them when they don't vote the way we want? Better yet, we haven't had a chance to educate them with facts, dispel myths and stereotypes, in order to change their minds.

First of all attend Town Halls!

I recently moved and made it a point to meet Rep. Mark Johnson when he was holding a Town Hall in Welches. This is a great start, if you are shy or are loathe to public appearances! You don't have to say anything, in fact I think it's better not to right away. Wear your gear though and ride your bike if possible. You will be seen.

When a Town Hall ends, legislators are usually surrounded by individuals wanting to push their single-issue causes. Chances are good they already know these folks. Hover nearby and keep your eye contact up. They are politicians and will break to shake your hand for a quick introduction.

Say something like this is your first Town Hall, or you just moved to their district, and that you wanted to introduce yourself as a constituent. I think it is important to use that label in an introduction because it shows you understand the bigger picture and care about many issues.

I also introduced myself as a retired teacher and a motorcycle rider rights advocate. This throws them off their game because it shows I'm more than a single-issue voter. I'm a member of the community that they represent, a constituent. Be ready to do this all in two minutes or less and then get out. This is super political bank.

U.S. Senators and Representatives are harder to get to for a quick introduction. If that's the case, there usually is a staffer nearby that you can introduce yourself to for now. We know the bigger the office, the greater the reliance on staffers for a massive intake of background information, so it's not necessarily a bad thing.

Secondly, find a great and current source of information.

For motorcycle rider issues this year, I rely on the Oregon COC website. Other websites include BikePAC of Oregon, AMA, MRF, etc. The reason I use this particular online resource over others is that it provides me with timely step-by-step instructions on how to communicate to my legislators. It only takes me 10 minutes to send a thoughtful email about a bill headed for a vote.

In the text that you copy and paste to your email, there is an INSERT PERSONAL STORY HERE section that you erase. Sometimes you don't have a personal story, but nonetheless, let that legislator know that you have already taken the time to attend one of their Town Halls and that they've met you already.

You are building a personal relationship that will help you to communicate when hotter, or more

contested issues surface in the future. I guarantee it will add weight to what you have to say. I actually lead with a reintroduction of myself in the email, adding that we had met already, and then I copy and paste the form letter.

Thirdly, attend legislative hearings

You don't have to say anything, and again it's better that the biker lobbyists coordinate the testimony at public hearings. Please let your lobbyists know you are coming because they will also walk you to your legislators' offices, reintroduce you and take care of 99% of the conversation if you want it that way!

The fact that you came to the Capitol is a big-time attention getter; great political collateral. Not everyone can take the time to participate on this level, but that's why Town Halls are so important.

This spring when HB 2598 passed House committee, passed the House floor, passed Senate committee and was headed to the Senate floor, I went back to the COC website and sent Senator Thomsen an email. Now for INSERT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE HERE, I added that I had attended the house committee hearings. I was able to add a personal account of that hearing in my email. Two sentences... They are totally paying attention to you now.

Yesterday, Senator Thomsen, sent me an email response saying that he had read over the bill that the morning and was definitely voting for it. He also asked me what had happened to the Lane Filtering bill that was in the Senate. He asked if I could explain why there were no votes because he was ready to vote for it. This gets me to...

Fourthly, follow up!

Follow up with information, thank yous, more questions, etc. I'm having Christopher Slater follow up on the Lane Filtering bill with Senator Thomsen, who might be a bill sponsor in the future. So, if you don't know the answer to something you are asked or don't have the time to follow up, let your lobbyists know!

When a constituent opens the door to a legislator's office, it is very different than a cold call. I'll leave you with a short story about what this behavior can lead to, as you get comfortable with being a politically active.

A long time ago I attended a packed Town Hall for U.S. Rep Wyden. Last question, he says, in a room of people anxious to get called on. I was with my seven year old daughter and looking motherly and safe, I guess. He picked me. I asked him what he thought about tying federal funding of highways to mandatory motorcycle helmet laws. It was a glorious moment. He said he didn't know anything about it but would look into it. I'll never forget the look on his face.

Being a constituent is a right AND a responsibility.

Now go get 'em!