

General Principles for Working Effectively with Local Government

The following list of principles from Family Community Leadership, OSU Extension Services, is designed to be used by an individual or a group. References are made to neighborhood associations, but they could be applied to any group.

- **Set Your Goals.** What is most important for your neighborhood association to accomplish in order to maintain livability? If you are working on a neighborhood plan, some goals have likely been set. If not, set aside some time for your Board to set its direction and identify needs. Prioritizing issues will make reaching your goals easier.
- **Know Your Issues.** Do your homework. Find out who is affected, to what degree and the consequences of no action. On a long-range issue, document your process, dates of events, who was involved, correspondence. Determine which issues will need to be addressed by a local government agency and which will need to be addressed by the neighborhood itself. Only neighbors working together will solve some problems.
- **Know the Structures and Purposes of City Government.**
- **Become Acquainted with Procedure.** Visit a few meetings of your public officials (e.g., City Council, boards, commissions, and so forth). Understand how they operate and realize the pressures they are under. Have someone explain to you the procedure if it isn't otherwise clear.
- **Work Personally.** Allow your officials to get to know you. The best form of contact is on the personal level: (1) personal appearance, (2) phone call, and (3) letter.
- **Keep Your Public Officials Informed.** Do not surprise your officials with unexpected actions. Bring written copies of your concern when meeting with them, and follow up your concern and action with letters (keep copies of everything you do!). Make reference to things you have sent. Keep up an ongoing relationship. Show your appreciation as well as dissatisfaction. Send carbon copies to other individuals involved (citizens, City staff, others).
- **Work on All Levels.** Try the chain of command first by going to the person most directly responsible for your concern. Then work on all levels by going to your appointed and elected officials. If you don't know who to talk to, do not hesitate to go to the top. Since many decisions are political, be sure to keep your Council member informed. If necessary, address the Council as a whole to be sure you are heard.
- **Make it Clear if You Represent a Group.** Identify the name of your group and its purpose. Use appointed contact persons to establish continuity and identity. Document attendance at general meetings and votes taken.
- **Get Solid Answers.** Don't be satisfied with vague answers. Talk to informed people and solicit answers you can rely on. Ask for and remind your officials of specific information - get dates, places, times, etc.

Finding Your Way Around City Hall

- **Be Open to Suggestions.** Take the suggestions of your officials seriously and follow up on them. Progress happens when everyone pushes in the same direction.
- **Follow Up.** Follow up a discussion with a memo summarizing the discussion and the outcome. Check back to see if whatever has been agreed to is being done or to see if decisions are being made. After the decision has been made, check back with the appropriate City staff or government official to be certain it is carried out.
- **Keep the Neighborhood Informed.** Use your neighborhood newsletter to keep the neighborhood informed. Talk with neighbors and friends about what is happening. Contact the newspapers to let them know your concerns. You may wish to issue a press release. Make your written information interesting. For more information see Section VIII, Getting the Word Out.

How to Influence Decision-Making: Action Check List

- ☐ Learn the decision-making process.
- ☐ Meet your elected officials as early as possible.
- ☐ Let your elected officials know about you.
- ☐ Concentrate and coordinate your efforts.
- ☐ Inform yourself-research the issue.
- ☐ Inform the members and the public of the issues.
- ☐ Attend meetings.
- ☐ Assist your elected officials.
- ☐ Know and support your allies.
- ☐ Always provide completely accurate information to elected officials; never deliberately provide misleading or false information.
- ☐ Focus on the preliminary stages of policy making.
- ☐ Never threaten elected officials.
- ☐ Form coalitions.
- ☐ Identify "swing votes."
- ☐ Be discreet.
- ☐ Be realistic.
- ☐ Thank elected officials for their help.
- ☐ Inform your members about which officials helped and supported your cause.
- ☐ Evaluate your efforts.
- ☐ Monitor the implementation of decisions.