

Communicating with Legislators

The Florida Engineering Society is working for you, representing your interests before Florida's legislative and regulatory bodies, but there is no substitute for an aggressive, on-going program of expanding and maintaining engineer-government relationships. That is why YOU, a member, are so critical to our effectiveness. **Member action is key to the success of any association's legislative program.**

Following are tips for writing letters, telephoning, and meeting with your legislators.

General Tips for Effective Communication

1. **Be Understanding** – put yourself in the legislator's place. Try to understand his/her problems, outlooks and aims. Then you are more likely to better communicate your needs in a way that your legislator understands.
2. **Be Positive and Constructive** – Instead of complaining about a situation, recommend ways to improve it. Commend the positive things you legislators do. Additionally, don't contact your legislators only when you want their votes. Make efforts to keep in touch with them throughout the year so they become familiar with you and your concerns. Invite them to your place of business or your group meetings.
3. **Be Reasonable** – Recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion. Your legislators represent all of their constituents- those who agree with you and those who don't. Never indulge in threats or recriminations.
4. **Be Cooperative** – If your legislators make reasonable requests, assist them by giving them information they need, such as personal examples of how proposed legislation will affect you and other businesses in your district.
5. **Be Realistic** – Remember, most controversial legislation results in a compromise. Don't expect everything to go completely your way, and don't be too critical when it doesn't.
6. **Be Accurate and Factual** – The mere fact that you want or don't want certain legislation to be approved isn't enough. If an issue is approved that is unfavorable to you, before rushing to blame the legislators, make certain you have the necessary information to present your case, accurately and clearly, as to why it is bad legislation.
7. **Give Credit Where It's Due** – When a lawmaker supports your position and votes your way, send a follow-up letter expressing your appreciation. If you are disappointed in a vote, communicate that as well.
8. **Learn to Evaluate Issues** – The introduction of a piece of legislation doesn't mean that it will become law. Learn the facts of who, what, when and why to make an informed decision as to your position on the legislation.

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9. **Stress Local and Personal Implications** – Illustrate how the legislation would affect the health and safety of Florida’s citizens. Always keep the human element in mind, such as the affect of legislation on consumers. It is very important to link your interest with the interests of the average American.

10. **Keep In Touch with Your Association** – Remember, FES serves as your full-time lobbyist. When dealing with your legislators, tell them that you are a member of FES and that we represent you on engineering issues. Inform FES staff about any contacts you make with your legislators, or contact us if we can assist you in your efforts.

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Calling or Writing

Legislators listen to their constituents. A telephone call or letter can be an effective tool for communicating with your legislator. A phone call or email may be particularly effective when there isn't time to write a letter, or when immediate action is needed just prior to an important vote. Your input can determine the outcome of a vote.

Constituents' calls and letters typically are directed to the legislator's staff person responsible for that specific issue. Don't be offended if this is the case. Staff members handle issues on a daily basis and will likely be able to provide you additional information and feedback. They will also see that the legislator gets your information.

- **Prepare Your Message Ahead of Time**

Know what you want to say, and what your position is on the issue. If your call is about a specific bill, refer to it by name and bill number and describe its subject matter. This information can be provided to you by FES.

- **Keep the Message Simple**

State your name and your purpose for calling. Mention if you have had previous contact with the legislator, then get to the point.

- **Give Local Examples**

Refer to specific facts and figures related to how this legislation would impact your business or the health and safety of Florida's citizens, bringing the issues "home" to the legislator. This communicates why the issue is important to you or your legislative district.

Meeting with Your Lawmakers

The best place to meet with your legislators is in their home districts. These meetings are an opportunity for you to introduce your company in a neutral setting away from the heat of the legislative battle.

Once a meeting date has been set, follow up with a confirmation letter to the legislator and a copy to the legislator's staff contact. After the meeting, follow up with a thank you letter to your legislator and again, copy the staff contact.

On some occasions, a legislator may be unavailable to meet with you and will arrange for you to speak with a staff member who handles the issue. This is still a very good opportunity for you to voice your opinions, and you can be assured that the staff member will pass along information about your discussion to the lawmaker.

- **Introduce Yourself**

Even if you've met before; state your name, company name, and business location.

- **Respect the Legislator's Time**

Get to the point of the visit as soon as possible.

- **Know Your Issue**

State your purpose for meeting with the legislator clearly and concisely at the beginning. Do not mislead. Do not discuss a topic that may get you or others in your industry into trouble. If you are

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unsure of an answer to a question raised by the legislator, simply indicate that you will get back to him/her with a response at a later time. Be specific; refer to legislation by bill number and subject matter.

- **Keep the Tone Positive and Constructive**

Make it easy for your lawmaker to support your position by giving good reasons to do so. An explanation of how the issue would help the people in his/her district can be a powerful way to illustrate a point.

- **Leave Fact Sheets**

Leave the legislator or a staff person with printed information after the meeting. FES can assist with this effort.

Addressing Letters to Your Legislators

Note: Unless you know your legislators on a personal level, it is always best to address them using their last names with the proper salutation and their complete address. Regardless of whether you are writing to a legislator at his/her Capitol or district address, you would address the legislator the same way.

TO A STATE SENATOR:

The Honorable _____ (name) _____
Florida Senate
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Senator _____ (name) _____:

TO A STATE REPRESENTATIVE:

The Honorable _____ (name) _____
Florida House of Representatives
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Representative _____ (name) _____:

For More Information...

If you have any questions about legislation or state government,
call the Florida Engineering Society at
850-224-7121 or visit the FES web site at
fleng.org

The following web site is also an excellent resource
for additional legislative and state-government information:
leg.state.fl.us