MOVING-THE-LEGISLATURE PRIMER

FIRST THINGS FIRST—WHO REPRESENTS YOU?

Know who your House Representative and Senator are. You can find out from your town hall clerk or registrar. If you don't live in Rhode Island, what is your in-state connection which may be important to your legislators? For example, employed here, have patients here, etc. (When contacting them, DON'T make believe you are their constituent if you are not.)

HOW TO BEST CONTACT YOUR LEGISLATOR

From most effective to least: Phone call to their home, letter to their home, button-holing them at the State House (not easy to do), e-mail (don't bother). The old adage for a legislator is "5 different phone calls on one issue from your constituents is a wake-up call".

WHAT TO SAY DURING THE CALL

Unless you know them personally, address legislators as "Representative Smith" or "Senator Jones" (NOT "Congressman", that's somebody else). Tell them who you are, what's the issue (if it's about a piece of legislation, knowing its number helps), why it's important to you, ask what you can do to get the outcome you'd like, leave your contact information. Be clear, be honest, be helpful, DON'T be a Know-It-All.

TESTIFYING BEFORE A COMMITTEE

When intending to testify on a bill, know its status and content by going to the State of Rhode Island Legislative website (bill status, http://dirac.rilin.state.ri.us/BillStatus/webclass1.asp).

You can verify that your bill is scheduled for a hearing and on a committee's agenda by calling the Speaker's office in the House (222-2466) or the Majority Leader in the Senate (222-6655).

In order to testify, CANCEL YOUR APPOINT-MENTS for the afternoon and come early. It is hard to find parking, the hearing rooms are notoriously small, and even if your bill will not bring out a large crowd, someone else's bill may. Find the Committee Room and SIGN IN on the witness form for your bill or you will never be called to testify.

When called, thank them ("Thank you, Mister/ Madame Chairman and members of the committee"), identify yourself, who you are representing, and say right up front if you are speaking in favor or against the bill. You may bring written testimony with copies for each committee member but if it's longer than half a page DO NOT read it to them. KEEP IT SHORT. Speak to your knowledge and expertise and how they inform your opinion. Anticipate the arguments of the opposition and, if possible, have a brief reply to them. Again try to avoid seeming like a Know-It-All. Be helpful, answer the committee members' questions if any, and, remember, knowledge may be influence but it is not power. The committee members (or at least their leaders) are the ones with the power, including the power to do the wrong thing from your perspective. Thank the committee.

RIMS HAS DECADES OF EXPERIENCE WITH THE LEGISLATURE

More advice is a phone call away: Steve DeToy, RIMS Public Affairs Director, 401-331-1401.