

Working with Elected Officials

As an Extension professional, it is critical that you work with local elected officials; and from time to time, you will have opportunities to engage with state and federal elected officials. Building strong relationships with elected officials at all levels of government strengthens Extension both in terms of advocating for our budget as well as for creating new programming partnerships with other government or non-government entities with whom the elected officials have relationships.

As you begin to work with elected officials, it is important to understand university guidelines for working with elected officials.

Guidelines Regarding Political Activity by Employees of the University

University staff and faculty members are encouraged to fully and freely exercise our rights to vote, as well as express our personal opinions about political candidates, issues, programs, initiatives, and referendums. “However, as employees of a public institution, there are restrictions on exercising these rights in a manner that suggests university endorsement of a cause or candidate.” See the complete guidelines at <http://legal.osu.edu/politicalactivity> (Smith, 2014).

It is also important to note that both The Ohio State University and the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES) have a team of government relations professionals who work with elected officials at all levels of government on a daily basis. Therefore, as you get to know and work with elected officials, please consult with and report back information to the Government Affairs staff.

Listed below are some helpful tips for building relationships and communicating effectively with elected officials.

Helpful Tips for Building Relationships and Communicating with Elected Officials

Get to know your elected officials. Look them up on the web to find their contact information, picture, bio, committees they serve on, and background information about the issues and causes they care about (Kush, 2004). Being able to recognize them and knowing something about them at an event, at the grocery store, in your office building, or anywhere you might see them makes it easier to initiate a positive conversation when you know what they look like and what are their interests.

Be ready to give your “Extension elevator speech” to remind elected officials about OSU Extension. Also focus on one or two key points or issues to discuss, as elected officials are busy people and their time is very limited. If you have a lot to discuss with them, it is usually best to schedule an appointment.

Always speak respectfully and address the elected official by his/her appropriate title such as Commissioner, Mayor, Representative, Senator, etc. followed by his/her last name. As a professional, you should never call or refer to an elected official by their first name in public or whenever you’re representing Extension, regardless of how well you may know the individual personally (even if you’re related to him/her or have been friends all your life).



When sending a printed letter or email, use appropriate etiquette by addressing the letter or message to: The Honorable (insert first and last name). For the greeting line of a letter or to begin the email message, write Dear (insert title) (insert last name). Some examples are listed below. The same general format would apply to elected officials at all levels of government.

Addressing a letter or other printed message:

The Honorable Jane Doe
Wayne County Commissioner
428 W. Liberty Street
Wooster, OH 44691

The Honorable Jim Smith
Ohio House of Representatives
77 S. High Street
Columbus, OH 43215

Greeting Line:

Dear Commissioner Doe,

Dear Representative Smith,

When sending correspondence to federal elected officials, it is best to send your message electronically via fax, email or uploading your message through a webform on the elected official's website, as all hard-copy mail is delayed and screened for security reasons. The screening process can sometimes take several weeks.

Get to know your elected official's staff. They are often the elected official's closest advisors and are very influential in shaping their views on an issue. Staffers often determine if you get an appointment with the elected official and often have the final words with an elected official before he or she votes on an issue. Don't be surprised or put off if the staff are very young. This is very common in many elected official's offices, especially at the state and federal levels (Kush, 2004).

Additional Resources

CFAES Government Affairs Office: <http://governmentaffairs.cfaes.ohio-state.edu>

Ohio House of Representatives website: <http://www.ohiohouse.gov>

Ohio Senate website: <http://www.ohiosenate.gov>

Sources

Kush, C. (2004). *The one-hour activist: the 15 most powerful actions you can take to fight for the issues and candidates you care about*: San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, K. (2014). *Communique, Budget Reminder – Guidelines Regarding Political Activity by Employees of the University*. Retrieved from: <http://extension.osu.edu/communique>.

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