

Contacting Your Legislators

Prepared by Rita Sullivan

The 2013 Legislative Session begins on Monday, January 14 and runs 105 calendar days.

Staying in touch with your legislators and the legislative process is an important part of active citizenship. Legislators are responsive to their constituent concerns, but there are some tips to maximize your input.

- Be sure you know who your legislators are. You can find that information at: <http://www1.leg.wa.gov/legislature>. You can find most information that you will need at this site including text of bills, committee hearing schedules, and contact information.
- Do your homework: be sure you know the levels of government and the issues covered by each. State legislators do not have anything to do with the military/veterans issues, Social Security or Medicare, and other national issues. They do not have any control over local city council decisions, actions by the County Commissioners and other local issues. However, they should be able to guide you to the right resources/people to help you with your problems with federal or local issues.
- Legislators need constructive input from their constituents. If you support or oppose a particular bill, explain why. How an issue affects you personally is very important information.
- Decisions about legislation are based on facts and verifiable information, not on anecdotes or "how high the pile". Pre-printed postcards, mass emails and petitions are not as effective as personal communication. It is a myth that legislators keep a tote board with numbers of contacts pro and con. Whatever method you choose - DO NOT think that a letter, **and** an e-mail **and** a phone call will be counted as 3 separate "votes".

On all messages of any kind, be sure to include your full name, address and phone number.

Letters:

If you write a regular postal service letter, be sure to include your name, address and phone number on the letter itself. It is a myth that a handwritten letter receives more attention than a typewritten letter. Handwritten letters are nice, but only if your penmanship is legible!

Phone calls:

A phone call can be very effective, but it is important to remember that the legislators are seldom in their offices. They spend most of their time in committee hearings, caucus meetings and meetings with constituents, etc. The legislative assistant will take a message and pass along the information. If you get the office voicemail, leave a complete (brief) message with your contact information. The voicemail system allows for easy retrieval and storage of messages.

E-Mail:

Legislators receive literally hundreds of e-mails each day. To make yours an effective communication be sure to use your actual name in the "From" line, include your full name, address and phone number in the message, and use a descriptive "Subject" line. ("Please support HB 11, water rights" or "Oppose expanded gambling")

If you filter your e-mail, be sure to include your legislators in "accepted" incoming mail. It is very frustrating to respond to an e-mail and have a message come back that the sender has been blocked.

In all your communications, please remember that legislators are contacted hundreds of times each

day. Each legislator has only one legislative assistant (Senators get an extra helper during session only) so you may not receive an immediate response. Be assured that your message is received and noted by your legislator.

Requests For Appointments:

Each office has a different system for handling appointment requests. You should start with a phone call to the office. The Legislative Assistant will let you know whether they prefer a call or an email request. E-mail is often easier to track. Legislators will make every effort to accommodate your visit to Olympia and be available to meet with constituents. Because of conflicting committee meetings and other legislative activities, it is best to be as flexible as possible.

If you go to Olympia, remember that winter weather can cause travel problems. Give yourself plenty of time and be safe. Because of the distance from Olympia, your time there can be quite short. Legislators are often located in different buildings so give yourself time between appointments to get to a new location. It is sometimes possible to meet jointly with multiple legislators. It is OK to ask for that option, but it will depend on their diverse schedules.