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## Making it happen for Oregon libraries

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The next session of the Oregon Legislature begins in January, 1999. Oregon Library Association's legislative package for '99 will most likely include:

- Continued opposition to threats to intellectual freedom.
- A \$2 per child appropriation to the Children's Services Grants for libraries to help get kids ready to read (now 75 cents).

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## Making It Happen for Oregon Libraries

by Nan Heim & Jody Fischer  
*OLA lobbyists*

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These are important goals. What will it take to achieve them? For starters, OLA members need to get to know your legislators now, and to make sure legislators get to know the good work done in your libraries.

Why is it so critical to start now? Simple. Once the session begins, the legislators simply do not have time.

We often hear comments such as, "I pay my dues to the association and they hire those lobbyists who are supposed to be looking out for my interests in Salem. Why do I need to get involved?"

Quite simply, you are the real thing! Not only do you know library issues better than anyone, you are also a constituent of at least two state legislators — a representative and a senator. This means you are the most effective spokesperson for your issues and your profession with your own legislators.

Legislators get information from various sources: their colleagues; staff; lobbyists; Governor and state agencies; the media; constituents. Which is the most important source? Constituents - the folks back home - you.

You offer your legislator something no one else can: a clear message about the impact of legislation of his or her constituency. You offer something else as well: a direct connection to people who vote.

We have a recent example of just how strong local librarians' voices can be. In the '97 session, Craig Berkman launched an all-out public relations effort to secure several million in "bridge funding" money from the Legislature to help public libraries hard-hit by Measure 47. The effort failed. Perhaps the number one reason it failed is that some librarians were uncertain about whether it was a good plan. Time after time, legislators we spoke to said, "I haven't heard from my librarians on this," or, even more devastating for bridge funding, "My local librarians don't like this plan." Bridge funding had a vocal champion and a well-funded p.r. effort behind it.

What it did not have was the strong, united support of the library community.

The first step towards effectively persuading your legislators is recognizing just how powerful your voice can be.

The second step is recognizing how simple it is to get involved.

Starting a dialogue with your legislator can be as formal as asking for a legislative briefing or as informal as asking a friendly question at a meeting. Here are some suggestions for the timid as well as the brave.

### MEETING YOUR LEGISLATOR

There is just no substitute for face-to-face communication. Try some of these ideas for meeting your legislator . . .

- Attend a local meeting where your legislator is speaking. Most legislators hold informal no-host breakfasts or other meetings for constituents — usually on Saturday mornings during the session. Go and ask a friendly question about how the session is going.
- Write him or her a note afterwards about how much you appreciated the meeting. No kidding! Over and over again we hear from legislators how much they appreciate thank you notes and how infrequently anyone takes the time to write them.
- Invite your legislator to read to children during a children's story hour at the library. Be sure to take a photo and send it the legislator with a note. Perhaps your friends' group would have a coffee afterwards. Use the occasion to make sure your legislator knows how important state Ready-to-Read grants are to your library.
- Send your legislator a news clipping about your issue with a brief note — not volumes of information, you understand — just a "thought this might interest you." A short note will help insure it will get read, and the newspaper article is an indication that the issue has media attention.
- Write a Letter to the Editor praising your legislator on his or her willingness to sit down and discuss your issue.
- Do the obvious: invite a legislator to coffee to talk about your issues.

### TELLING YOUR STORY

Legislators are individuals who come from all walks of life. You will find each is unique — as we all are! Here are some tips for starting that conversation:

- It's fine to bring along a small group of people (one or two others) involved in your issues.

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Appoint a chief spokesperson or agree beforehand who will deliver what information.

- Don't be afraid to show passion about your issue! But do remember to be courteous and non-threatening. Never promise support or a contribution in return for a vote. And never threaten opposition if the legislator doesn't agree with you.
- Remember: "All politics is local." Your legislator wants to know what happens in the libraries in his or her district as a consequence of a particular action. Use local examples for your points.
- Ask your legislator for advice on how to pass a piece of legislation. Asking for advice is good for two reasons. It allows a legislator to talk (always a good strategy). And they are in fact some of the best political strategists around.
- Be flexible about an appointment; be on time; write a thank you note after your meeting.

It's an election year . . . volunteer for a campaign!

NOTE: This is a political activity, NOT appropriate on public time. However, it is legal for public employees to campaign on their own time.

Working as a citizen volunteer on a legislative campaign is one of the easiest — and most effective — ways to establish personal contact with your legislator.

Pick a candidate in your area. Do your own research to find one you support. We trust your judgment! And then volunteer — even just a couple of hours of your time can make a real difference.

The best time to call and volunteer is during these time periods: from mid-March through the May 19 primary and from early September through the November 5 General Election. If you don't know the phone number for your candidate, call us at (503) 224-0007. We'll get it for you.

If you are a public employee, you must limit your political activities to your private time. On your own time, as a citizen, it is your right — and your responsibility! — to participate in the political process. On your own time, there are a number of helpful ways you can help a candidate . . .

- Hold a coffee in your home for the candidate to meet voters.
- Organize a group of your colleagues to "fold and stuff" and address envelopes for a campaign mailing. This is an activity which Corvallis-area librarians did for Senator Cliff Trow, who won his re-election campaign and became an ardent champion for library causes.

- Put up lawn signs (at least one on your own lawn!). This can be fun with a group of colleagues.
- Call the campaign office and offer your services. Again, we'll get you the phone number if you don't have it.


We encourage you to get involved in the political process for any candidate you feel will do the best job for the state of Oregon. The important thing for us is to get involved — and see for yourself that you can make a difference!

Another good example is Jim Hayden's volunteer work for the campaign of Ben Westlund in Redmond in the '96 campaign. Westlund won election to the Oregon House, became an active champion of libraries and is now OLA's newest Oregon Legislator of the Year!

#### IS IT WORTH IT?

Here is a review of OLA's accomplishments at the '97 session of the Oregon Legislature . . .

- A 50% increase in state Ready-to-Read grants to public libraries. By the end of this biennium, OLA will have helped secure over \$32 million in state and federal funds for local libraries over the last decade.
- Successful opposition to a "raid" on the State Library's operating budget by the State Supreme Court and State Department of Justice. The raid threatened the state agency fee system which funds much of the State Library's operations. And that, in turn, threatened the use of federal library funds throughout the state.
- Successful opposition to proposed measures threatening freedom of expression in our state.

None of this would have happened without the active participation of librarians and library supporters in the political process. 

#### NOTE

*We are always glad to hear from you about your experience meeting with your legislators, or your impressions of candidates in your area. Please call us - Nan and Jody - any time at (503) 224-0007.*

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*Things don't just happen. They are made to happen.*

*— John F. Kennedy*