



# from your Executive Director

By Bryan E. Smith

TOI Executive Director

## Township Government needs you as a Lobbyist!

**T**HE LEGISLATIVE SESSION has kicked into high gear and township government is once again faced with many pieces of legislation that are bad. It is so vital that *all* township officials get involved and help as a “Citizen Lobbyist.” Your help can definitely make a difference.

There are 10 rules to being an effective citizen lobbyist and here’s my list to share with you:

### 1) Don’t Be Intimidated

One of the most common maladies of the citizen lobbyist is intimidation. Believe it or not, there are some people who actually believe they are not qualified to *participate in their government*. After all, talking with a member of the Illinois General Assembly or a staff member in the governor’s office (or the governor himself) is what participatory government is all about. We may be a republic—a representative form of government—but we are a *democratic republic*. That means we vote for people to be our voice in the Capitol, but it does not mean we cannot tell them what we want them to say.

There is a difference between being intimidated and being a boor. If you can strike the delicate balance of knowing your role as a township official and respecting the role of your legislator, you’re half-way home to being an effective citizen lobbyist.

So, remember Rule #1: *You are entitled to voice your opinions to your fellow elected officials.*

### 2) Some Other Rules

One of the charms of township government is that you represent your friends and your neighbors. We like to think of ourselves as The Government of the People Next Door. Many township officials welcome calls at home because, after all, they are part-time government servants in many instances.

Common sense and courtesy will go a long way toward winning the heart and soul of your local state officials.

But you’ll probably achieve the best results if you attend to Rule #2: *Make an appointment or call at the office.* An Illinois state representative has roughly 100,000 constituents; a senator represents roughly 195,000.

### 3) Familiarity Breeds Effectiveness

There’s a misconception that legislators make up their minds when they are in Springfield. On the contrary, many make up their minds about key legislation long before they head for the Capitol. The reason? Their constituents take advantage of getting first crack at them before they leave the district.

Much like a good news reporter develops a network of news sources to get good stories, a good legislator will develop a network of constituents to depend on for reasoned and enlightened information. To be counted among those reasoned and enlightened souls should be one of your goals as an effective local government official.

*So to enhance your effectiveness as a source of information and, hence, your value as citizen lobbyist, you need to get to know your legislators.* That’s rule #3.

### 4) People need People

The most effective professional lobbyists today are the ones who know their business inside and out. Professional lobbyists have raised their own bar from the days when back-slapping and drink-buying were the staples of moving legislation through the halls of government. Most professional lobbyists are well-educated and have become experts in their field. But the good ones also share a common trait that is so important.

They know how to be nice to people. As simple as it may seem, being nice to people is one of the most important components to effective citizen

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lobbying. And we're not talking about just being nice to the movers and shakers. The really good lobbyists—the *really smart ones*—know how to treat secretaries and staff personnel with respect.

After all, you can't get through the gate without a pass from the gatekeeper. Don't underestimate the importance of being polite and respectful when talking with your legislator's secretary, district office manager or other staffers. If they control access to the lawmaker, that means they can turn off the spigot just as easily as they can turn it on.

So don't underestimate the importance of following Rule #4: *The gatekeeper is a critical factor in the legislative equation.*

## 5) The End of the World Happens Just Once

An old fable comes to mind when we discuss Rule #5: *Don't cry wolf.*

Your legislators face hundreds of votes on thousands of issues during any given sessions. And you know what? Every issue is important to *somebody*. This is where lobbying gets a little tricky. A wise old man once said there's nothing wrong with picking a fight, but smart people pick fights they know they can win.

That doesn't mean you should go to your legislator *only* on issues that are critical to the operation of township government. Not at all. But you'll be much more effective as a citizen lobbyist if you know when to use the hammer. If you make a habit of creating a crisis for every small issue, your effectiveness will seriously be inhibited when a truly serious issue surfaces. So, use a little common sense when it comes to going to the wall.

## 6) All Roads Lead to Springfield

Some of the most amazing displays of citizen participation in government occur every spring in the Capitol in Springfield. Thousands of special interests converge on the Capitol as the General Assembly meets from January until its scheduled adjournment date at the end of May.

The best time to find a distracted legislator is when the General Assembly is in session in the Capitol. Sometimes, though, you have no choice. Even if you've done your homework and you've taken the time to visit your legislator at the district office, some issues will dictate a trip to Springfield.

When you do come to Springfield, you already have an advantage. As a member of the Township Officials of Illinois, you have access to a professional experienced staff. But you'll be better equipped if you know where your legislator's office is and the telephone number.

You'd be surprised how welcome constituents are when they visit a legislator's Springfield office. Remember, you may not be a registered, professional lobbyist, but you've got clout with your legislator. Not only do you and members of your family vote, but you've got a political organization of your own, otherwise you probably wouldn't have been elected a township official in the first place.

Keep Rule #6 in mind: *Road Trips show you care.* So, make an appointment to stop by the Capitol complex and say hello. Topics Day on April 3 is a perfect opportunity.

## 7) Get to Know the Rules

That's not a redundancy. The General Assembly follows a biennial calendar that syncs itself with holidays, the season, and general election cycles, not necessarily in that order.

And bills get introduced, are heard in committee, follow the amendment process in second reading, are heard for the third time, and a roll call vote (if they make it that far). Just like in the civics books. In order to pass from one chamber to the other (and ultimately to the governor), legislation must receive a *constitutional majority*, that is, a majority of elected members of the chamber. In the Senate, it takes 30 affirmative votes out of 59 members for passage. It takes 60 votes of 118 elected representatives in the House.

Much of the real work is done in committees, where bills can be voted up or down, held for consideration or subjugated to the netherworld of subcommittees for "further study."

In addition to knowing the mechanics of law-making, it's important to know the calendar. The lion's share of the work in January, February, and some of March is dedicated to committee work. April generally sees committee consideration of crossover bills from one chamber to another. May is when the workload is heaviest and most hectic.

An effective citizen lobbyist isn't unlike a master gardener. People with green thumbs know you need to work the dirt before you plant the seeds. Doing your background work and keeping your legislator informed of your issues before they get to Springfield is the best way to harvest in May.

## 8) What Yogi Said

It's true what Yogi Berra said: It's never over till it's over.

No legislation is dead in Springfield until the lawmakers all go home. And there's often an after-life when the General Assembly reconvenes.

Most professional lobbyists will tell you they play

defense far more often than they play offense. In other words, a vast majority of the lobbyist's time is keeping track of legislation that is detrimental to their cause and trying to kill it before it hurts that cause.

Therefore, keeping yourself informed of issues is an important component in effective citizen lobbying. This is where having a good line of communication with your legislator's office can really pay dividends.

### 9) Follow the Ball into the Glove

Kids are taught in Little League to watch the ball all the way into the glove. If you don't see the ball enter your glove, it's possible you'll drop it.

It's important to follow up your issue with your legislator when the session is over. Too often people scatter from the Capitol to vacations, jobs, and other diversions. It's human nature.

But if you've been successful in getting your legislator to vote your way on an issue important to your township, it is *critical* that you remember to follow up on your efforts and *say thank you*. And if it happens that you lost, or if your legislator didn't see things your way on one issue, don't be afraid to write or call and thank the legislator for at least listening. Government operates best when people can

disagree without being disagreeable.

Rule #9: *Follow the issue to the bitter end.*

### 10) You're Going to be Around a While

Rule #9 leads into Rule #10: Live to Fight Another Day.

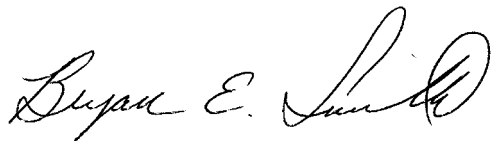
Civility and respect are key in effective lobbying effort. If you remember that, you'll succeed when the next fight comes around.

Understand that you will be back, and so—most likely—will your legislators. Life's a circle, and so is the process of governing.

The more you repeat the cycle, the better and more effective you will be.

I encourage all Township Officials to become "Citizen Lobbyists." With Topics Day coming up on April 3, what a better time to register and jump into the game! The future of Township Government depends on all of us working together and moving in the same direction.

I look forward to seeing many of you "Citizen Lobbyists" join us at Topics Day on April 3.



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