

Engaging with State Candidates as a City Official

Every legislative session, state lawmakers are asked to make decisions on issues that affect Iowa's cities. This November, Iowans will elect all 100 members of the Iowa House of Representatives and half of the Iowa Senate. This marks a great opportunity to build relationships with candidates as they spend the coming months getting to know the communities they hope to represent.



■ Start With Relationships, Not Policy

One of the biggest misconceptions about legislative advocacy is that every meeting has to revolve around a specific bill. In fact, some of the most valuable conversations you'll have with legislators won't involve policy at all. Relationships built before disagreements arise are almost always stronger than relationships formed in the middle of a contentious legislative debate.

■ So... How Do You Get Started?

Step 1: Know Who's Running

Identify candidates running in your legislative districts. Most county auditors publish sample ballots on their websites, making it easy to see who will appear on your ballot.

Step 2: Reach Out

Candidates are actively trying to meet people throughout their communities. Find them at chamber events, community festivals and other gatherings. Introducing yourself at one of these events is often easier and more natural than scheduling a formal meeting.

You can also reach out directly. Some candidates respond quickly to emails or phone calls, while others are easier to connect with in person. Every individual is different.

Step 3: Keep It Simple

Many local officials worry they need to become policy experts before reaching out to legislators. You don't. Talk about what you already know! Share what's happening in your community. Celebrate projects that have made a positive difference. Explain challenges you're working through. Discuss opportunities you'd like to pursue if barriers were removed. You're the expert on your city.

Conversation Starters

- "What inspired you to run for office?"
- "Have you worked with city government much before?"
- "I'd love to show you a project our city is working on."
- "What's one issue you've been hearing about most while campaigning?"
- "If you ever have questions about local government, please don't hesitate to call."

■ Talking About Difficult Issues

You may need to explain why a policy isn't working as intended, how a recent change has created challenges for your community, or why you disagree with an approach being considered at the Capitol. When discussing difficult issues, remember:

- Lawmakers are balancing competing priorities and hearing from constituents and stakeholders who may see the issue very differently than you do.
- Focus on explaining your experience rather than assigning blame.
- Help lawmakers understand the 'why' behind your concerns.
- Disagreement doesn't mean the conversation failed. Your goal is to help them understand the impacts on your community and their constituents.

Making the Most of the Conversation

Listen as much as you talk.

Ask questions and learn what issues matter most to the candidate.

Keep it local.

Real stories from your community are far more persuasive than broad talking points.

Be respectful.

You won't agree on every issue, and that's okay. Respectful conversations build credibility.

Keep it concise.

Focus on a few important ideas rather than trying to cover every municipal issue.

Be honest.

If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Offer to follow up later.

Offer solutions whenever possible.

Explaining a challenge is helpful; suggesting a path forward is even better.

Follow up.

A short thank-you email goes a long way and gives you an opportunity to share any additional information you promised.

Stay engaged.

Don't let the relationship end after Election Day. Continue checking in throughout the legislative session and beyond.

Know the Rules



DO

- ✓ Meet with candidates and talk about your community.
- ✓ Invite candidates to learn about your city.
- ✓ Host a candidate forum or debate as long as **all candidates seeking the same office are invited.**
- ✓ Use a public facility under the same rules available to everyone else.



DON'T

- ✗ Use city resources to ask people to vote for or against a candidate.
- ✗ Use your city email, website, or official social media account to campaign for a candidate.
- ✗ Use a city vehicle to attend a campaign event or transport campaign materials.
- ✗ Use city resources to campaign, solicit contributions or votes, or poll voters about candidates.
- ✗ Place campaign signs or materials on city property, including public right-of-way.

When in doubt: Keep city communications informational and nonpartisan, and check with your city attorney or the Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board before using city resources in connection with any campaign.



(515) 244-7282



legislativestaff@iowaleague.org



www.iowaleague.org

