

# Working with Your Members of Congress

Alliance Mutual Aid Call Series  
February 8, 2012

Now, more than ever, building and cultivating relationships with members of Congress is critical to protecting and advancing bicycle and pedestrian issues on a federal level. On February 8, 2012, the Alliance hosted a Mutual Aid Call on this topic with insight from Tyler Frisbee, legislative assistant to Congressman Earl Blumenauer; Gerik Kransky, Advocacy Director for the Bicycle Transportation Alliance in Oregon and Ed Barsotti, Executive Director of the League of Illinois Bicyclists.

## Tips from Tyler Frisbee



### Be an ambassador for biking and walking in your member's district

- Congress members can't be authorities on every issue. Unless they're very keyed in to transportation issues, they may be unaware of the impact of biking and walking in your community. Act as their educator. Help them understand the benefits and importance of active transportation for their constituents.
- Don't just tell, but show your member the impact of biking and walking. Invite your member to see federal dollars in action, like a Safe Routes event (Congress members love kids!), a ribbon cutting or a 30-minute ride.

### Follow-up is just as important as an invitation

- Designate a specific point person from your organization who will contact and serve as the liaison in following-up with the member's staff.
- Make sure your member feels the love for accepting your invitation. Send a thank you note immediately — to the district office, rather than DC, as the security isn't as stringent — and, in that note, highlight the points you want to emphasize about the impact, importance and influence they have in advancing biking and walking in the community.
- Shower your member with, not just private, but public credit for supporting biking and walking. Write a letter to the editor and send a photo to your local newspaper thanking the member for attending your event. Include an article in your e-news. And make sure you forward any coverage and links to the Congress member's staffers so they see your appreciation.
- After the thank you, stay in touch about the issues. Check in with the member's staffers and make sure they know where you stand on the issues they're facing in Congress. On important votes, commend or question your member on why they voted the way they did. Make sure they know you're watching — and you care.

### Don't underestimate your impact: You DO make a difference

- Your efforts absolutely make a difference. By being engaged, following-up and providing reliable information, your work influences your members of Congress.
- It doesn't take a huge mobilization to register on your member's radar. Even 20 calls in one day on a particular issue strikes a major chord.

## Tips from Ed Barsotti:



### Take advantage of the Bike Summit — but be strategic with your time

- We want to meet with every Illinois office when we're at the Summit. Even after dividing the list with our regional organization — the Active Transportation Alliance in Chicago — we still have too many meetings to be able to reliably schedule with Congressional members. So we have focused on meetings with and developing relationships with transportation staffers. This has advantages:
  - It's easier to schedule meetings and staffers are often more receptive.
  - These relationships pay off: When key staff know who you are, they are more likely to try to help with funding and policy issues and share inside information that might help sway other members.

### Cultivate key relationships with in-district meetings

- We focus on key members, like those on the critical House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. It's easier to schedule in-district meetings than Summit meetings. This usually allows more meeting time and allows us to invite a small number (up to 3-4) of other key district attendees.
- The roster of participants in the meeting depends on the member and may include: local advocates, supportive/connected local elected officials, bike industry and health sector representatives, a local agency that has benefitted from a Transportation Enhancements or Safe Routes to School grant, etc.
- Be prepared for the meeting. Coordinate stories and insight from meeting participants beforehand. Make sure you know who will make the ask.

### Host a public thank-you event for your member

- Build on your in-district meeting relationships by holding an event with your member with a larger audience, mostly consisting of nearby members of your organization and members of a local bike club. This lets your member know there is wider public support for biking and walking.
- Make the focus of the event some form of public recognition for positive things that Congressional member has done for our issues. For instance: The LIB hosted a ride with Rep. Johnson on a trail funded with TE dollars, which offered an opportunity to both thank and speak with Johnson one-on-one during the ride.

### Know where the dollars are going and use that to name drop

- Develop lists by district of grant winners from our dedicated funding sources. This helps in finding local agency supporters, picking locations for events – and “name dropping” of in-district towns and residents who have benefitted from these programs.
- Contact your state DOT and visit [www.Enhancements.org](http://www.Enhancements.org) to cull this data.



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### Tips from Gerik Kransky:



### Get personal with your member of Congress — and his/her staffers

- To be effective with legislators, it's important to get to know them and their districts. Spend some time learning their biographies, whether it's their educational background or their previous profession, to try to understand how your legislator's experiences might guide their policy interests. Get to know the legislator's district in terms of demographics, local issues, the economy, and any unique challenges they might face. With this base of knowledge you are better prepared to make your case in the appropriate context, build support for your issue, and be on your way to building a relationship.
- Equally important, give legislators a chance to get to know you and your interests before you ask for support in the middle of a decision-making process. Invite them to your neighborhood or office to take a tour of a recent project or area in need of attention. Take the time to listen to elected officials and get to know their concerns. This process of getting to know each other over time will help you find shared policy interests and opportunities to work together.
- Most of the actual work you do with an elected leader will be with their staff. It is vital to build strong working relationships with your field representatives and key policy staff. Focus on providing brief, clear communication that is directly relevant to your work. This will allow you and staff members to hone in on specific actions each of you can take to support your shared policy interests.
- Avoid sending long rambling emails, unfocused questions, or asking them to read a lengthy research project. Serve as a reliable resource, and over time, you can build trust and develop more frequent communication.

### Be a bastion of good, reliable information

- To build support for our issues, provide both facts and personal stories that bolster our case. Make the case in a way that connects real challenges and real success stories with our desired policy change or decision. It is best to bring the facts and figures and provide them as background documents that support more personal stories.
- For example, we might want to generate a list of all the bike and pedestrian projects built in a certain Congressional district with the federal Transportation Enhancements program. We can highlight the jobs created during construction and educate legislators about the health, environmental, and economic benefits proven through research. When we combine good information with a good storyteller, someone from the district who is knowledgeable, well spoken, or well respected, we have a better chance of connecting with lawmakers.



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## Like Tyler said, persistence and presence is key

- To be successful we must follow through on our commitments with legislators and be persistent in our approach. Too often we attend a single meeting or send a single letter and move on to the next issue. After you make a specific request, it's important to continue to reinforce your message by sending a thank-you card, following up with an email to summarize the meeting and list action items discussed, and attending additional meetings and public events while carrying your message. Stay in touch with your legislator's staff on a regular basis. Clear and consistent follow up will produce results.
- This level of relationship building requires an investment of time. Doing so will pay dividends in the long run through increased access with decision makers and a greater support for your particular policy goals.

## Additional resources:

### Advocacy Toolkit (BTA):

[http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/advocacy\\_toolkit\\_bicycle\\_transportation\\_alliance/](http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/advocacy_toolkit_bicycle_transportation_alliance/)

### Working with Congressional Delegates (Alliance Mutual Aid Call 2011)

[http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/working\\_with\\_your\\_congressional\\_delegates\\_recording\\_and\\_tip\\_sheet\\_alliance/](http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/working_with_your_congressional_delegates_recording_and_tip_sheet_alliance/)

### Meeting Request template for Members of Congress (America Bikes)

[http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/meeting\\_invitation\\_for\\_a\\_member\\_of\\_congress\\_america\\_bikes/](http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/meeting_invitation_for_a_member_of_congress_america_bikes/)

### Advocacy Training 201 (Smart Growth America)

[http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/advocacy\\_training\\_201\\_smart\\_growth\\_america/](http://www.peoplepoweredmovement.org/site/index.php/members/members4/advocacy_training_201_smart_growth_america/)

## Additional questions about working with your member?

Contact Tyler Frisbee: [Tyler.Frisbee@mail.house.gov](mailto:Tyler.Frisbee@mail.house.gov)