



PACD Legislative Toolbox

for conservation districts working to build relationships with legislators



PACD

PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF
CONSERVATION DISTRICTS, INC.

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Introduction to the PACD Legislative Toolbox

Developing an effective working relationship with lawmakers is imperative for legislative success. Legislators need to understand that conservation districts are the local agency responsible for the delivery of many state programs. Whether it is technical assistance to landowners, approval of erosion and sedimentation plans, or writing nutrient management plans, districts are available for assistance with environmental regulations. Consequently, the PACD legislative program focuses on educating elected leaders about the programs and projects spearheaded by conservation districts.

Conservation districts should contact legislators several times a year through individual meetings, an information session or a project tour. Districts should also send correspondence or make phone calls to their legislator's district offices to discuss specific legislation or local concerns.

The PACD legislative toolbox provides information designed to encourage a meaningful relationship with elected leaders. The toolbox includes tips on meeting with legislators, hosting a legislative event, a sample invitation and press release, an explanation of the Pennsylvania budget process, information on how a bill becomes a law, advice on building a support base, and working with your local media.

Click on the links below to view each topic.

- **Legislative Basics**
List of ideas conservation districts can implement to build effective relationships with legislators.
- **Hosting a Legislative Event**
Step-by-Step guide for conservation districts planning a legislative event.
- **Sample Invitation**
Invitation to an event
- **Sample Press Release**
Post-event press release template
- **Build a Coalition, Broaden Your Base Support**
Advice on gaining support for conservation district goals by creating coalitions.
- **Media Moments**
A how-to guide for getting your message out to local press.
- **The Pennsylvania Budget Process**
Primer on how Pennsylvania's budget is passed.
- **How a Bill Becomes a Law in Pennsylvania**
Details the political process involved in law-making.

The Legislative Basics

The following is a list of ideas conservation districts can implement to build effective relationships with legislator.

- Send legislators district newsletters and annual reports
- Invite legislators to the district awards dinner and offer them a short timeslot on the agenda
- Give awards to legislators at the awards dinner
- Send thank you notes after meeting with legislators and after important bills are passed
- Provide tours of the district office and district projects
- Involve legislators in activities such as Envirothon, dedication of district projects, etc.
- Write brief, concise letters and ask for support
- Send correspondence on issues
- Invite legislators and their staff to field tours and other special events that illustrate conservation district projects and activities
- Send pictures of the legislators in the field with constituents to their office for their newsletters
- Host a legislative education event showcasing projects
- Send letters or notes of congratulations to legislators for notable achievements

Hosting a Legislative Event

Conservation districts should consider hosting legislative events at the local level. Many districts already hold these types of events to discuss conservation district programs and activities, bringing federal, state, and local legislative leaders together. The steps below will guide conservation districts through the event planning process.

1. Pick a date when the General Assembly is not in session. Remember on election years all House members and half of the Senators are running for re-election, so their schedule right before the election may be hectic. Click here for the session schedule: <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/> or contact PACD.
2. Your event can be a tour, a meeting, or an information session. Choose a convenient and easily accessible location. It is sometimes easier to get legislators to attend events first thing in the morning rather than the middle or the end of the day. Providing some type of refreshment or meal is an option to consider, but not mandatory.
3. Develop an invitation list. PACD recommends inviting all federal, state, county, and local elected leaders. Some legislators may send staff, especially federal legislators, but staff will relay the information you provide. Also, consider inviting cooperating agencies, related organizations, and the local press. This event may be the only time all the interested parties are together to discuss mutual interests. Official printed invitations are not essential, an invitation letter on district letterhead will be sufficient. Invitations should go out at least one month before the event. Ask for an RSVP at least a week prior to the event to have an accurate count. Districts may have to call the legislators' offices and the press to receive a response. Also, by calling and reminding the staff, it reinforces the time and place of the event.
4. Putting together an agenda is the most important part of the planning process. Legislators are generally extremely busy, so it is unrealistic to expect them to spend more than 2 hours at a legislative event. Begin the program with introductions by the board president or manager. Have the MC announce that reporters are at the event. Pick interesting speakers who can give 15 minute presentations including a question/answer session. The presentations should be about recent district accomplishments and ongoing projects, challenges the district is experiencing, and most importantly a thank you for the legislator's support. General information should be discussed, but more detailed information can be distributed via handouts, etc. Keep to the schedule so those at the end of the agenda are not lost in the shuffle.
5. Prepare handouts and a press release concerning the event. Make sure the handouts and press release are sent to those who were invited, but unable to attend.
6. Take pictures at the meeting. After the event, follow up with a thank you note to all attendees. Include a press release and pictures to elected officials for use in their own newsletter.

Sample Invitation

The _____ Conservation District cordially invites you to attend an information session (or tour) on (date) at (time). The event will take place at (location). Approximately (number) local, state, and federal officials, interested organizations, and press will be joining the _____ Conservation District to discuss district activities, accomplishments, and goals. We anticipate ending the meeting at (time).

Please RSVP by (date) by calling (Phone number) and plan on joining us for this important event. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Local Board President

Sample Press Release

_____ Conservation District Holds Information Session

For Immediate Release

Contact: (Board President or Manager)

(Phone Number)

(E-mail Address)

(Your town, PA) – The _____ Conservation District recently held an information session to discuss district activities, goals and accomplishments. Numerous elected officials joined the district along with various interested organizations and cooperating agencies. The topics discussed included (add local accomplishments, etc).

(Write a short paragraph about each presentation given at the event).

"It was great to see so many interested individuals attend the _____ Conservation District event," stated (Board President or Manager). "We were thrilled to see such support for our district's activities."

(Elected official – perhaps the county commissioner on the board) stated, "(Name County) needs to thank the _____ Conservation District for their ongoing activities to promote sound environmental practices and protect our county's natural resources. Their educational efforts and technical expertise are vital components to our County's environmental accomplishments."

Build a Coalition, Broaden your Base Support

A coalition, or alliance, consists of individuals or organizations working together for a common purpose to make more effective and efficient use of resources. Working in tandem with other groups is a great way to broaden your base of contacts and show support from numerous sources. By building these bridges, conservation districts can enhance their positive image and increase the contacts made to legislative leaders.

A coalition should be structured to establish a shared vision and involve all key players. It is important to approach leaders and directors from various organizations who have indicated an interest in a joint effort. Plan on regularly scheduled meetings with the groups collectively to develop a strategy, assign tasks, and follow up with these groups on other issues to continue the relationship.

Another opportunity to use coalitions is to collectively sponsor events. By broadening your sponsorship, you may increase attendance and expand your outreach. Focus the coalition efforts on those organizations that have a similar constituent base. For example, when targeting the farming community ask local farm groups to join you in addition to the other partners you typically work with. You may also want to consider periodically sending out joint press releases showing extensive support and interest.

Media Moments

The media is a resource to get the message out. Getting your story into the local press means people who are not familiar with conservation districts may take notice and become a supporter. Consequently, developing a relationship with reporters and becoming identified as a source for good stories is important.

Typically press releases are used to relay information to the media. Learn what interests particular editors and slant your press releases accordingly. If possible get to know your local newspaper's editor and environmental reporter, and address the press release specifically to them. Many press releases never get read because they are sent to the wrong person or to an erroneous address.

A press release should announce something new and be based on an issue important to the reader or listener. When writing your press release, give it an exciting headline or title to peak reporters' interests. Make sure you put the reason your story is newsworthy in the first paragraph. Answer the 5 W's and 1 H - Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? - in the first sentence or two. A quote from a director or staff person in the middle or end of the press release will bring the story to life, but make sure the quote says something relevant in a concise manner. Include the first and last name of the person quoted and their title or position in the organization. Remember that your media release will be competing with many others submitted each day. Keep the release succinct and limited to one or two pages. Always include the name and phone number of a contact person. If possible, follow up with a phone call to make sure your press release was received and not lost on someone's desk. Thinking like a reporter and using visual aids such as pictures also helps get your message across to the masses.

As you begin to develop a media contact list, computerize it into a database including the name of the reporter, the name of the media source, the e-mail address, the telephone number, fax number, and postal address. If you are working with other groups, ask them for their media lists to compare names and media outlets. Keep your list updated by keeping files of press clippings and adding new reporters to the list when you see new names are covering your stories. Don't be exclusive in your media list. It is far better to inform disinterested people than to miss out on reporters who might want to cover your events.

When distributing information to daily newspapers with a large circulation, make contacts with reporters who have given you positive responses in the past, and develop a rapport with reporters who normally cover environmental issues. If you don't know any reporters at a particular media source, introduce yourself to the news editor and ask for their suggestion on contacts from the news desk or other related departments. These relationships should be developed and will become invaluable when you are interested in promoting a conservation district activity. If you live in a more urban or suburban area, you may also want to foster contacts with other media forms such as radio, TV, and wire services. Finally, do not underestimate your local weekly newspapers, which are read thoroughly by county citizens. Make sure you include them in your distribution list.

The Pennsylvania Budget Process

Pennsylvania has a complex system to pass a budget that is almost a year-long endeavor. While the budget is not usually passed annually until July 1, the process actually starts almost one year prior to the final General Assembly vote. Around August of every year all state agencies are asked to submit their budget requests to the Governor's budget office. They use revenue projections to determine their budget base. Generally, agencies are told to keep their requests within a small or no increase percentage.

After each agency submits their budget requests, the Governor's budget office, along with other key members of the Governor's staff, develop a budget document that is unveiled mid-way through the fiscal year in February. The Governor addresses the joint General Assembly with his State-of-the-State Budget speech outlining the projected Commonwealth assets and his thoughts on how state funding should be appropriated. Often the Governor uses this venue to unveil several program priorities for the administration.

Shortly after the budget address, usually in March, the House of Representatives and Senate hold several weeks of appropriations hearings. Typically all state agencies are asked to meet with the House and Senate Appropriations Committees and outline specifics of their agency's proposed budget. Additionally, a number of other entities that receive significant state funding such as the state related educational institutions are also asked to appear before both Committees. These hearings are an opportunity for members of the General Assembly to discuss specific programs and activities associated with various agencies and other groups.

Following the General Assembly's appropriations hearings, a budget is crafted and introduced typically in the spring of the year around April or May. Usually the bill reflects each chamber's budget priorities. The budget bill then goes through the normal legislative process with each chamber having the opportunity to vote on the fiscal plan.

After the General Assembly passes the budget bill, the Governor has the opportunity to sign the bill, veto the bill, permit the bill to become law without signing it, or line-item veto particular items. A line-item veto means specific lines can be stricken out of the document before the Governor signs the bill. If that is the case, the General Assembly can override the line item veto with a two-thirds majority in each body.

How a Bill Becomes a Law in Pennsylvania

Making a law in Pennsylvania is a meticulous process that takes time and effort, and can take years for an idea to become law. Every two years Pennsylvania begins a new legislative session, meaning any legislation that has not become law within that two year timeframe has to begin the process over from the beginning.

There are thousands of bills introduced every legislative session on many different subjects. It is virtually impossible for legislators to be an expert on every bill, so the General Assembly has organized various standing committees to scrutinize topic specific legislation. After a bill has been introduced, it is assigned to a particular committee. While in committee, staff analyzes the bill, writes bill summaries and answers members' questions. Sometimes members want to amend, or change, the bill, which can be done at the committee level. Staff, with the help of the legislative reference bureau, prepares amendments for the members to introduce when the bill is being considered in committee or on the House/Senate floor.

The standing committee majority chairman has the discretion to consider, or not consider, legislation assigned to them. He/She is influenced by constituents, other members who want to see the bill moved through the legislative process, or by caucus leadership. The committee chairman may call for a hearing to openly discuss the bill, inviting witnesses to explain the legislation and their reasons for support or opposition.

During a committee meeting, legislators have the opportunity to ask questions about the legislation and offer amendments. Many times the prime sponsor of the bill attends the committee meeting to offer additional information such as why the bill was introduced, additional details on the legislation, who is supporting the bill, and who would be affected by the legislation. After a discussion, members of the committee vote on any proposed amendments, and then decide by majority vote whether or not to move the bill out of committee and further through the legislative process. They also have the option to table, or set aside, the bill for a period of time or permanently.

If the legislation is voted out of committee and involves an expenditure of funds, the bill will be reassigned to the Appropriations Committee where a fiscal note, or the price tag, will be written explaining how much it will cost to enact the bill. The committee process is the same as before and is another opportunity for votes to be influenced by constituents and advocates of the legislation. After the Appropriations Committee has considered and passed the bill, it moves on to the full chamber.

Before any vote takes place on the Chamber floor, majority and minority party members meet privately in separate caucus rooms. There, they review the content of the legislation and decide whether to support or oppose all bills scheduled for a floor discussion in the near future. Each bill is considered on the floor three times. The first day of consideration is simply an announcement that the bill has been reported from a committee. There is not a debate, no amendments are offered, and no vote is taken. The bill is typically tabled after this reading for up to 15 legislative days, or calendar days when the legislature is in session. If the bill is taken off the table, it has a second reading, when it is screened again to determine whether or not enough information is available to debate the bill's merits. This reading is when the legislation would be re-assigned to the Appropriations Committee for a fiscal review. The third consideration of the bill is when a full debate, including the opportunity to suggest amendments and vote on passage (up or down), by all members. Debate over a controversial bill can go for hours and can be followed by a vote. In some instances a member can call for a vote to table the bill, meaning the chamber would not vote on the bill at all. Each bill requires a constitutional majority to pass, or 102 votes in the House and 26 in the Senate.

After the legislation passes one chamber it is sent to the second chamber for consideration. The second chamber has the same process for bill consideration, with the same checkpoints, committee structure,

and floor consideration. After final passage several things may happen. If the bill has not been amended in the second chamber it is sent directly to the Governor for his signature. Most likely, however, the bill will have been amended in the second chamber, meaning the new version will have to be approved by the original chamber. There, members decide if they agree or disagree with the proposed changes. If they do not agree, the bill goes to a conference committee to work out a compromise. The conference committee consists of members from both chambers who work out the differences of the bill and send it back to both chambers for a yes or no vote. A conference committee report may not be amended or changed by either chamber. If the majority of members in both chambers vote yes, the bill is sent to the Governor to be evaluated. The Governor can sign the bill into law, permit the bill to become law without signing it, or veto the bill. If vetoed, the General Assembly can override it with a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber.