Effective Lobbying Techniques

In a session on effective political lobbying techniques, the two speakers were in perfect harmony on their key points. Dennis McGrann, a professional congressional lobbyist with the public relations firm Lockridge Grindal Nauen, P.L.L.P., and Margaret Donahoe, executive director of the Minnesota Transportation Alliance, emphasized that engineers have power! “Polling and focus groups tell us that what engineers say has high value with the public,” Donahoe said. “They think engineers are knowledgeable and that they don’t have hidden agendas—so engineers can have a lot of impact by getting involved and talking to elected officials.”

To illustrate her point, Donahoe discussed President Obama’s 2011 State of the Union Address. She said it is remarkable that the president referenced the 2010 ASCE Report Card (“When our own engineers graded our nation’s infrastructure, they gave it a D,” he said). “The fact that a group of engineers put that report together—and it ends up in the State of the Union Address—shows what can happen when people work together,” she said.

Both speakers also emphasized that engineers can amplify their innate power by joining coalitions—and that coalitions are especially effective when they bring together disparate groups. Donahoe gave the example of a 2008 Minnesota transportation coalition that included organized labor and numerous chambers of commerce—organizations that are on opposite sides of many issues. “Just the fact that they were working together on transportation got the attention of the Minnesota legislature and was instrumental in raising the state’s gas tax for the first time in decades,” she said.

Counterbalancing the idea of strength in numbers, both speakers emphasized the importance of personal meetings with legislators and members of Congress. “You have to show up in D.C.,” McGrann said. “It demonstrates the commitment you have to what you’re advocating.” He added that a D.C. trip should include visits with federal agencies such as the FHWA and FAA.

Become respected and feared

“The natural state of politics is inertia,” Donahoe said. “You have to figure out how to create a sense of urgency.” She said you do that with a coordinated media presence and by developing relationships with lawmakers. “If they ignore you, you won’t get anywhere unless the conversation becomes public. So letters to the editor and guest editorials all count. Legislators read the local newspapers all the time. We’re in competition with other issues, so we have to keep talking or we won’t be heard. It shows legislators that we’re really going to do something about it.”

“You want to be both respected and feared,” Donahoe continued. “But you don’t want to be a bully, so it’s a balancing act. You have to find a hook. What are people concerned about right now? Using potholes, flooding, or rising gas prices as issues makes it personal and more compelling. They make it local. Get your issue on the moving bandwagon. That’s how we find the political will to do what needs to be done.” She also suggested using professional lobbyists “because they have relation-
ships with legislators and Congress that you don’t have.”

The speakers also agreed that it’s essential to be in the lobbying game for the long haul. McGrann pointed out that, while members of Congress may retain their positions for years, their staffers, who are the gatekeepers to those members, tend to come and go every few years. So it’s important to communicate frequently with the Congress members’ offices. McGrann said engineers who regularly send useful information on transportation issues to Congress members find that the members start calling those engineers for information—and that the Congress member may then begin advocating on behalf of the engineering community to federal agencies such as the FHWA.

Both speakers emphasized that communication with Congress can come in many ways. “Write letters,” said McGrann, “and say nice things, keeping in mind that when you write to Congress, your letter becomes a public document. And copy everyone under the sun—appropriate Congress members, relevant congressional subcommittee chairs, federal agencies, and your coalition stakeholders.”

In outlining the appropriate content of a letter to Congress, McGrann quoted Hubert Humphrey, who (among many others) said: “First tell ‘em what you’re gonna tell ‘em. Then tell ‘em. Then tell ‘em what you told ‘em.” In other words, begin with an overview that provides background on state and local involvement, previous funding history, and a clear explanation of the federal need and jurisdiction. Then expand with details that show why the project is needed and who among the public (voters to the Congress member!) will benefit from the project. Then end with a summary of key points followed by a call to action. Next follow up with a phone call to the member’s office to confirm receipt of your letter.

Know the process
Both speakers also emphasized the importance of understanding the Congressional process. For example, Donahoe said that, because the word “earmark” has acquired such a negative connotation, it has been replaced with “home state projects”—a phrase now being used in authorization bills. McGrann said many Congress members have publicly sworn off voting for such local projects, so it’s essential to know which ones to write to. But he added that you still need to lobby the members who won’t vote for a local project because those members have the power to kill projects proposed by the members who are willing to propose and vote for local projects.

Another critical aspect of the Congressional process discussed by McGrann is the difference between authorization and appropriation. He explained that the normal sequence is authorization first and then appropriation. For example, ISTEA and SAFETEA-LU were huge multi-year authorization laws. But no projects could actually begin under those laws until appropriation laws were passed in subsequent years. McGrann explained that 12 appropriation bills are passed each year in the Senate and 12 more are passed in the House—each usually handled by the committee with jurisdiction over the issue central to that bill. He added that a project may eventually receive greater funding in the appropriation phase than was stated for it in the authorization phase.

In summing up, McGrann said this: “Don’t underestimate yourself! Remember what long-time Speaker of the House Thomas ‘Tip’ O’Neil said: ‘All politics is local!’”