

How to Effectively Lobby For Or Against Legislation Affecting Exotic and Small Animal Pets

These tips offer compelling lobbying strategies for legislation affecting exotic and small animal pets.

By J. Matt Lea

Posted: Jnuary 14, 2008, 5:30 p.m. EDT

Phone Calls

Sometimes legislation/bills are aggressively debated, so avoid getting angry or overzealous, especially if an issue directly affects you as a guinea pig owner, ferret owner or other small animal pet owner. Try to explain your case eloquently, and do not read from a prewritten note created for mass use. This annoys staff because they hear these same comments repeatedly on the phone. When you call your legislator's office, speak clearly, share your experience, and ask if you can give any more information. Sometimes, depending on the issue, your name and phone number may be requested for future reference.

Plan A Visit

As a lobbyist, I believe the most effective option is to contact an elected official in person and try to schedule a meeting with him or her. Ask the scheduler for a meeting no longer than 15 minutes. If you are a member of a club or special animal interest group, pick a day like "Exotic Pet Owners Day" on Capitol Hill and gather as many group members and family to go with you as possible. I recommend calling all of your elected officials' offices at least two weeks before a visit. Let them know you are going to be there and you would like to meet with him or her, or a member of their staff. If you cannot get a meeting, go by the office anyway and drop off a brief information packet for the representative's later review.

If you have more than three or four members of your exotic animal owners club present on Capitol Hill, split up the offices into groups so you can quickly cover more ground. From my own personal experience, I have seen that most legislators get in their offices early to prepare for the day's business.

When requesting time, the best phrasing is, "Hello, my name is _____, and I am calling on behalf of the _____ club, which favors SB-2345. The members of our club and I are in strong support of this bill and would like to have 15 minutes or less to speak to Senator _____ or a member of the staff. We would like to share our excitement over this critical issue."

Because of time constraints, do not be offended if you are declined from meeting with the elected official. If you can get an audience with a staff member, take it. Remember, most staff members are the gatekeepers for information for any elected representatives, and talking to them is sometimes more beneficial than talking to the representative themselves.

As mentioned, an elected official's schedule is very hectic. An old lobbyist trick I have used several times is to find out what the legislator looks like, wait outside their office, hang outside the committee room, or roam the halls until he or she comes out of committee or returns to their office. Do not be annoying or get in the way. If you are lucky enough to bump into your representative, quickly introduce yourself, give him or her your information packet, explain how you feel, and say goodbye. This whole process should take about 45 seconds at the most.

Exercise Your Right

The key to effective lobbying is to argue your case to both representatives and senators so your opinion is known to both sides of the legislative body. Remember, the most important lobbyist is not the highly paid lawyer representing the big industries of the world, but the average American citizen exercising his or her right to influence their elected representatives.

Always keep this thought: do it for your small animal friends — be brief, be clear and state your opinion from the heart. You'll do fine.

Page One

Author Bio

J. Matt Lea holds a degree in Political Science from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and currently serves as Special Assistant to Chattanooga Mayor Ron Littlefield. Lea is also the registered city lobbyist to the Tennessee General Assembly. He is a former aid to U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, and Tennessee Senate Minority Leader David



Fowler. Lea and his wife Sharon own several pets, including a dwarf rabbit named Bunny.