



A GUIDE TO LOBBYING YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

**Prepared by the
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INTRODUCTION

It is clear from the constant stream of anti-automotive legislation across the country that, in order for the automotive hobby to survive the present, let alone flourish in the future, we must work toward becoming more politically involved and effective.

To help in this effort, the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) offers this guide to becoming a more politically effective auto enthusiast community via the SEMA Action Network (SAN).

Our goals are simple. For our way of life to survive, the community must

- Adopt a positive attitude about politics, politicians and government;
- Build strong relationships with elected officials;
- Educate elected officials and staff on the hobby: who is involved and why we are important; and
- Become a positive, involved and vibrant part of our communities.

Most importantly, our hobby must learn to work the system. Auto enthusiasts and clubs must learn to lobby.

Specifically included in this guide are guidelines on how to properly prepare for and meet with elected officials, the best and worst ways to contact a legislator on issues of concern and a discussion about how you, as an enthusiast, can become more politically aware.

We hope you find this guide informative and useful.

MEETING WITH LEGISLATORS

Without question, meeting with and hopefully developing long-term productive relationships with individual legislators is the most effective form of grassroots lobbying. Nothing can beat making a direct connection with the elected officials who can draft, support or oppose pro-automotive legislation. The following are some tips on preparing for and meeting with legislators.

Setting Up a Meeting – Determine who should be in attendance. A small, informed group of people, including some folks from the legislator’s district or state, is the best bet. One person is fine. One unified group is better. A coalition of leaders from many organizations is optimal for both getting a message across and demonstrating your political strength. Generally, the more people, the more likely it is you will meet with the legislator rather than staff.

Meeting with a Legislator/Staff – Be prompt and patient. Note that a legislator’s time is often interrupted by last minute meetings, schedule changes, etc., so plan accordingly. If the legislator is not available, take advantage of meeting with staff. Staff members are the eyes and ears of the legislator; they are responsible for drafting, recommending and derailing legislation.

Plan the Discussion – 15 to 20 minutes is generally the longest appointment with a legislator you can expect, so be concise and present only 2 to 3 points for discussion. This will keep the meeting organized and brief while still allowing for helpful discussion. Prepare written “talking points” or factual information beforehand to help keep yourself and the meeting on track.

Show That You Are Local – If you are a registered voter in the legislator’s state/district, make that fact known -- legislators pay particular attention to constituents. If you are from the same state, but not from the legislator’s district, it is still worthwhile to mention. Every two years legislators either win reelection or lose. You need to show that your support can help this person get reelected.

Show That the Issue Is Local – Demonstrate a connection between the topic at hand and the legislator’s constituency. Emphasize the local impact of what you are there to discuss. If it’s a car crusher bill, for example, point out the many automobile enthusiasts, car clubs and related businesses in the legislator’s district that depend on the parts and parts-cars that might be subject to crushing.

Show That the Issue Is Personal – Communicate your concerns on a personal level. How will a harmful automotive-related bill affect you and your friends, local clubs, businesses, the community and the car hobby in general? Let the legislator know how the passage or defeat of a particular bill will have a direct impact on you and your community.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open – Give the legislator a chance to express an opinion. If he or she is supportive, don’t be afraid to ask for help in advancing your issue and in contacting other like-minded legislators. Provide a written summary of your position. Finally, as soon as you get home, write a note thanking the legislator for meeting with you. Reference the points you talked about in the meeting and attach any additional information requested.

Keep the Communication Positive – Never lose your cool, argue or threaten, even if the legislator or staff person is rude or uncooperative. If your meeting is unsuccessful, try your best to leave on a positive note. *Never burn your bridges.* The next time an automotive-related issue arises, the same legislator might be needed to support your cause.

LETTERS AND OTHER WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

When you are pushing an issue or supporting or trying to defeat a bill, writing your legislators is a very effective way of getting your message across. However, some methods of communication are a lot more effective than others.

I. Personal letters –

The absolute best thing to do is to write a personal letter. Personal letters show legislators that the author is knowledgeable, interested and committed to the matter at hand. Sending a personal letter also alerts the legislator to the fact that the author is politically active. Legislators keep close track of how their mail is running on particular issues, so your letter will have an influence whether the elected official personally reads it or not. Many legislators argue that *one clear, logical individual letter is worth more than a petition with a thousand signatures!*

Suggestions for writing personal letters

Be Timely – Write when an issue is current. Procrastination and apathy guarantee that your voice will not be heard and that legislators will assume you don't really care.

Be Brief – Limit yourself to one page and one topic. The goal is to be read and understood.

Be Specific – Reference specific bill numbers. Include basic information like what the legislation would do and how it would affect you and other people in the legislator's district or state. Remind legislators how their actions affect your hobby and your vote.

Be Legible – Clearly sign your name and include your address in the letter itself (envelopes with return addresses are routinely discarded). How can a legislator know who you are, what your concerns are, or where you are from if he can't read your handwriting? Better yet, type your letter.

Be Supportive – Write thank you letters when a legislator supports your cause. Too often they get only "anti" or complaint letters. A thank-you will make you stand out and it will help establish a more personal relationship with the legislator.

Don't Be a Pest -- Don't become a constant "pen-pal." Legislative offices track who writes and how often. Avoid being seen as a constantly writing crank or malcontent; it will dilute your message.

Turning a SEMA Legislative/Regulatory Alert into a Letter

From time to time, the SEMA Action Network (SAN) will alert contacts in a particular state to a legislative or regulatory proposal that should either be supported or opposed. In nearly all cases, alert messages include "bullet points" which can easily be incorporated into a personal letter.

Note how the following alert transforms easily into a personal letter.

SAMPLE ALERT:

LEGISLATIVE ALERT

Pro-Hobby Inoperable Vehicle Bill in New Jersey

A bill (A.B.3299) has been introduced in the New Jersey legislature that would prohibit local areas from implementing an ordinance or land use regulation that prevents automobile collectors from pursuing their hobby. The only requirement would be that collector vehicles be maintained and stored by the owner out of ordinary public view.

We Urge You to Contact Your State Legislators in Support of this Bill

- A.B. 3299 provides safeguards for hobbyists to work on collector vehicles on private property.
- A.B. 3299 establishes reasonable provisions that vehicles be located out of ordinary public view by means of inside storage, fencing, trees, shrubbery, etc.
- A.B. 3299 allows collectors to conduct mechanical repairs and modifications to vehicles on private property.

SAMPLE LETTER:

(Date and your address)

(Address of your State Legislator)

Dear (Senator/Representative/Delegate) _____:

First paragraph -- Introduce yourself and state your position:

My name is John Q. Public, a member of the XYZ Car Club and I am writing to urge your support for Assembly Bill 3299. A.B. 3299 would prohibit local areas from implementing an ordinance or land use regulation that prevents automobile collectors from pursuing their hobby. Owners would only be required to maintain and store collector and parts vehicles out of ordinary public view.

Letter body -- Use the SEMA Alert bullet points to help make your argument. Feel free to personalize what you say. Limit the body to one or two paragraphs:

As an active car enthusiast who relies on inoperable cars to provide parts for restoring my classic vehicle, I strongly believe that this bill would benefit hobbyists across New Jersey. Specifically, A.B. 3299 would establish important safeguards allowing hobbyists to conduct mechanical repairs and modifications on private property as long as vehicles are located out of ordinary public view.

Conclusion -- Briefly restate your case and ask for the legislator's support:

Please help the auto enthusiast community to maintain and strengthen the vehicle hobby. I urge your support of A.B. 3299.

Sincerely,

John Q. Public
XYZ Car Club

III. Form letters

“Canned” or form letters are okay, but not nearly as effective as a personal letter or email. Certainly, they are easy to produce and send in; however, they lack personal touch and conviction. Legislators are more likely to discount form letters because they may show a lack of effort, and lack of effort can be translated into lack of interest. Legislators want to see effort. Effort shows them that you have a genuine interest in an issue and a willingness to go out of your way to make your case.

Nonetheless, if you are embarking on a form letter campaign, keep these two iron-clad rules in mind:

Include your address – A great number of form letters have no obvious space for you to LEGIBLY write in your address. Without an address, the legislator has just a piece of paper. He or she won’t know whether you are a constituent or not.

Give extra effort – Take an extra 30 seconds to write a 1- or 2-line personal note at the bottom of the form letter. Briefly restate your concerns. Ask for a written response. Any effort to make the form letter personal will help it be noticed.

IV. A very few words about petitions

They usually don’t work.

Few people read petition papers and many of the people who sign them have no idea what they are signing. Legislators know this and overwhelmingly discount their importance.

Petitions also tend to be poorly prepared and legislators have difficulty or no time to look through thousands of signatures to determine if any constituents signed on. At best, they neither help nor hurt the legislative battle you are involved in. Either way, petitions are often a waste of valuable time that could be used on more effective methods.

Bottom Line: Write personal letters or pay your legislators a visit.

PHONING YOUR LEGISLATORS

Phone calls are a relatively effective way of communicating your concerns to your legislators. Phoning is especially important when a bill is moving quickly through the legislative process and time is short. The opportunity cost is that issues need to be relatively simple to be communicated well. Below are some suggestions.

Be simple – Call about one issue at a time. If possible, refer to the bill number and what the bill would do.

Be brief – Introduce yourself, state how you feel about a particular bill or issue and ask for the legislator’s support. If the legislator is undecided, ask to be updated on his or her stance after a period of time or ask for a meeting where you can argue your position.

Be logical – Call your own representatives before you call any others. Your local legislators are always your first priority. They owe their political fortunes to you and your neighbors.

Be connected – Always leave your name and address, particularly if you’re a constituent. Legislative offices, to keep track of how the constituency feels on certain issues, often log phone calls. Usually phone inquiries are responded to by letter after a period of time. If you phone to express an opinion but refuse to leave an address, you are wasting your breath.

Be smart – Always say thank you. **Never** be abusive or threatening.

SAMPLE PHONE CALL:

Enthusiast/Car Club Member: Hello, I’d like to speak to Assemblyman X about A.B. 3299, the pro-hobby enthusiast Inoperable Vehicle Bill.

Legislative Staff Member: Sorry, Assemblyman X is voting right now. May I take a message?

Enthusiast: Yes, my name is John Q. Public, with XYZ Car Club. I’d like to ask Assemblyman X to support A.B. 3299 because it would stop local areas from enforcing an ordinance or land use regulation that would keep automobile collectors from working on their cars.

Legislative Staff Member: I will give the message to Assemblyman X and ask him to respond to you. Can I have your address?

Enthusiast: (GIVE ADDRESS)

Staff member: Thank you.

Enthusiast: Thanks for your help.

BECOME POLITICALLY ACTIVE AND EFFECTIVE

Without question, enthusiasts need to continue becoming more politically active to protect our hobby and preserve it for the future. There are a number of ways to become more politically active and savvy. For our purposes here, we have split the suggestions into both specifically political and generally political involvement. Consider some of the following options.

Specific Political Involvement

Support auto-friendly candidates — Consider working on the campaigns of friendly candidates. Donations of time, money and publicity are extremely important to politicians because it takes all of this to run for, win and hold office. Once the candidate is elected, there will be a built-in relationship between you (or your club) and the legislator that could pay dividends should any anti-auto legislation be introduced in the legislature.

Maintain relationships with local legislators — Work hard at cultivating relationships with local politicians. Invite them to parades, rod runs, car shows, rallies etc. Give them a place of prominence, perhaps make them a celebratory judge at a show. Give them the opportunity to see that your club or association is large, influential and an important part of their constituency. In addition, send club representatives to town meetings, etc. to demonstrate club interest and strength and to hold them publicly accountable on pro-hobby issues. Finally, schedule periodic office visits to local legislators to keep them on their toes.

Be smart about who you deal with — Deal with legislator friends where you can find them. A friend is someone who supports the hobby's cause no matter whether he or she is Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative. Don't waste valuable time and effort trying to sway legislators who are publicly opposed to your viewpoint. Put your energy and time into developing relationships with those who support you and those who may be on the fence.

Maintain mutual respect with officials — Some people have nothing but contempt for elected officials. If you, or any member of your club or organization are such a person, re-read this document with an eye toward understanding the value of becoming involved in a positive manner. Otherwise, keep a distance from the process. A counterproductive, uncooperative or abusive attitude will communicate itself to a legislator and will ruin your efforts at developing a positive working relationship.

General Political Involvement

Build an automotive coalition — Some of the most positive and politically effective pro-hobby organizations in the country are statewide or regional coalitions. Creating a coalition recognizes that there is strength in numbers and that the rights of **ALL** vehicle enthusiasts, from hot rodders to antiquers to off-roaders to late model collectors, should be represented. Simply put, a united pro-hobby front can be an influential political force.

Get involved in the community — Enthusiast groups should consider joining local business, service and community organizations to ratchet up their positive exposure in the community. In particular, auto clubs should consider developing relationships with charitable organizations. Holding charity events and fundraisers can provide a great opportunity to show local residents and politicians that automotive groups are a positive community force rather than a bunch of machine-obsessed outlaws.

Cultivate a relationship with the local media — Never underestimate the value of having friends in the media. Contact local newspapers and radio/TV stations to publicize unique automotive gatherings, car shows, charity events, etc. Pitch stories about your club, something that your group is involved or interested in to local reporters. Write editorials, op-eds and letters to the editor expressing the viewpoint of your friends and the auto hobby in general on legislative issues. If hobby groups are successful in presenting a positive image to the media, the media will most likely reciprocate. The community, as well as politicians, notice good publicity. Present a positive image.

Vote! — Remember who your friends are. Elect them and keep them in office.