Growing a Grassroots Network

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The National Trust for Historic Preservation and Main Street America advocate for effective policies for historic preservation and community revitalization through training, technical assistance, and promotion of effective advocacy tools. The Advocacy Toolkit, including this chapter, was initially published through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. To receive support with your policy issue or to access additional resources, contact the National Trust for Historic Preservation (forum@savingplaces.org) or Main Street America (mainstreet@savingplaces.org).
Introduction

Engaging in the political process and communicating with elected officials are essential components to successfully promote historic preservation and revitalization policies. Elected officials want and need to hear from their constituents. As they develop their priorities, they take into consideration opinions of both trusted experts and their supporters. As preservationists, it is our responsibility to communicate directly with decision makers and to help them understand the benefits and value of historic preservation.

What is Grassroots Advocacy?

Grassroots advocacy is collective citizen action to influence decision makers. Its goal is to activate a broad group of people to take action on an issue and to give those people the tools to communicate to their elected officials effectively. This “bottom-up approach” allows the voice of every American to be taken into account in the political process.

Why a Grassroots Network is Important?

Building a grassroots network is a key element to promoting preservation policies. First, there is truth to the saying that there is strength in numbers. If preservation has popular support and is seen as a priority to the general public, then elected officials will be more likely to take it into consideration when acting on policy measures. Having a large number and wide range of supporters lends credibility to the preservation policy for which
you are advocating. A strong grassroots network will also help to build the preservation movement by engaging interest from new audiences. People are more likely to become engaged when they are aware that advocating on behalf of a specific issue will have a positive impact on the quality of life in their community. A grassroots network that can be counted on for quick action is also helpful when potential threats arise to historic and cultural resources. Finally, developing a grassroots network empowers people by helping to exercise their voice in the political process.

How to Get Started

To develop a grassroots network, you must identify potential advocates, enlist their assistance in meeting the advocacy goal, identify the best way to communicate and track information with advocates, and identify when and why to initiate contact with elected officials.

Who are advocates?
Anybody who supports community redevelopment and historic preservation can be an advocate. An advocate is someone who speaks on behalf of a particular person, idea, or issue. To build a strong grassroots network, develop a group of supporters that represent a wide-ranging and diverse constituency. In addition to targeting traditional supporters, try to identify potential advocates by engaging bigger, issue-based coalitions that may have similar interests. Elected officials tend to respond positively to groups that represent more than one interest.

How do you sign up advocates?
Be creative in where and how you spread your message and be sure to capture the contact information of people who are interested in your causes whenever possible.

Potential Advocates May Include:

- Statewide preservation organizations
- Main Street organizations
- Business / property owners
- Community and neighborhood organizations
- Affordable housing groups
- Cultural associations for underrepresented history
- Tourism Associations / Convention & Visitors Bureaus
- Educational institutions
- Historic sites
- Chambers of Commerce
- Small business support organizations
- State historic preservation office / Main Street coordinators
- Local elected officials
- Real estate/economic development professionals
- Architects and planners
- Environmentalists
- Outdoor recreation groups
- Religious Institutions
- Affinity Interest groups
- Smart growth organizations
- Other organizations that support preservation goals

Some methods include:

- Exchanging contact lists with other organizations.
- Asking those who join online forums and online events to sign up to become advocates.
- Collecting names and contact information at events (a sign-up sheet and card drop can work but make sure they know how you plan to use their...
email address, so they have an option to give you the information or not).

- Using the “tell a friend” option on email communications.

- Sponsoring advocacy events such as workshops, lectures, or press conferences.

- Partnering with other organization for a social media takeover to attract new followers.

Keep your advocates informed and interested. Be sure to thank them for their efforts and celebrate in shared successes throughout the campaign — positive reinforcement keeps advocates active, appreciated, and interested.

What to communicate?
Advocates need background information and details of a particular issue before springing into action. Supporters may be unfamiliar with the legislative process, so it is important to provide clear, concise information and action steps. When advocates are asked to act on an issue it is helpful to provide the following information:

- Background information about the issue
- Timing of the decision surrounding the issue and communications needed
- Clearly defined action steps
- Key, concise talking points, including a sample letter or “script” for a conversation
- Contact information for key decision makers
- A method for advocates to provide feedback and insight to you

In general, when communicating with grassroots supporters, be certain that the message supports the policy goal, can be explained in one or two sentences, can be reinforced by sound bites, statistics, and anecdotes, and can be tailored to reach targeted decision-makers while remaining consistent with the overall request.

Remind grassroots advocates that thoughtful, personalized, and well-crafted communications with elected officials that include relevant preservation examples carry significant weight. Communication templates should always be personalized to be effective.
How and when to mobilize a grassroots network?

Grassroots advocacy is only one way to get your message across to elected officials. It is important to determine when to use your grassroots network to accomplish what you are trying to achieve. First identify what you are trying to accomplish and who you want to convince to do it—do you want to get a message to a few key committee members, or do you want to let the entire legislative body know about your issue because of an upcoming vote? A few timely phone calls from people that your targeted elected officials know and respect, either personally or professionally, may be effective at one point in an advocacy campaign, while grassroots outreach, such as a full-fledged writing campaign to all elected officials, may be just the action you need in another phase. As you develop a strategy for an advocacy campaign, consider at what point or points during that campaign that it would be appropriate to engage grassroots advocates and plan accordingly.

Those developing grassroots networks for preservation must coordinate the effort by supplying information and guidance about what to say to lawmakers and when to say it. An essential role as coordinator is to encourage advocacy by others who also value the same goal. Communication with advocates must inform them of pressing developments and also motivate them to act. Just like lawmakers, advocates need to know how their efforts will benefit their community. Remind grassroots advocates that there is “strength in numbers” and ask them to spread the message to others. Express a sense of urgency to encourage advocates to take quick action. However, don’t contact advocates for only urgent matters. Be sure to keep them up-to-date on important developments, let them know the outcome of your advocacy request, and always thank them for acting on behalf of an issue.

To quickly reach as many advocates as possible, social media and e-mail are often the logical methods given their ease of use and cost effectiveness. Many tools, like advocacy software, make this job easier, but a wide-reaching distribution method and a solid message are one of the most important components when communicating to advocates. A few examples of advocacy mobilization tools include:

At the 2018 Main Street Now Conference in Kansas City, MO, attendees at the Opening Plenary cheer “Thank You for Saving the Historic Tax Credit.” Filmed from the stage, this video was shared with Members of Congress to reinforce the nationwide support for revitalization policy.
• **Social Media site** – Keeps advocates up-to-date and can provide links for further advocacy actions (e.g., sign petitions, etc.)

• **Website** - Background information about the issue, status reports, contact information for key decision makers, sample letter to the editor, and talking points can be assembled on a website.

• **Newsletter** - A newsletter can provide in-depth coverage on an issue and status updates. Covering an issue in a regular publication enables supporters to become more familiar and comfortable with the issue.

• **Electronic Alert** - Electronic alerts are a type of email that can be used to call advocates into action.

• **Feedback** - A mechanism (e.g., online, regular meetings, etc.) for advocates to share any responses they receive from decision makers should be provided.

Timing and frequency of requests for action should be a key consideration when interacting with grassroots supporters. Be strategic about communication, and respect both your advocates’ and elected officials’ time. Legislative calls to action should be planned according to a legislative schedule or calendar. The most opportune time for action may be at the introduction of a bill, before a mark-up of legislation, or just prior to a vote. Also be cognizant of all communications from other interest groups and how your advocacy requests can most effectively fit into the mix. Partners in an effective coalition coordinate the timing of requests for action. Sometimes sustained outreach over weeks, months or years is needed. Create a joint timeline for grassroots engagement that can be modified as needed.

Grassroots advocates also play critical roles in the following important advocacy actions:

• **Sign-on letters** – A sign-on letter, which it highlights the support of many grassroots advocates, is extremely impactful. Groups of mayors, for example, can come together with a specific request while other times, it may be helpful to have many different groups of advocates
(e.g., business owners, community nonprofits, developers, architects, planners, mayors, etc.), sign and send a joint letter. Sign on letters don’t mean that we have everyone

- **In-district visits** – Sitting down with a decision-maker with constituents in their own district as opposed to a meeting in the state house or on the Hill can be impactful. An important role of grassroots advocates is to convey what is important to them and their constituents. The most successful meetings show how the decision impacts multiple groups’ interest. Also, offers the opportunity to again highlight a sign-on letter if sent in advance of the meeting.

- **Site visits** – If a picture is worth a thousand words, a site visit to a historic place or downtown is invaluable. During a site visit, decision-makers can visibly see as well as hear about the issues directly from constituents. Tours of potential projects as well as those in progress or completed give insights about job creation, a place’s history as well as other key community impacts.

- **Lobby days, events, receptions** – Grassroots advocates coming to city hall or the capitol to meet with legislators can make a big impact. Decision-makers are more likely to adopt a position or support a policy when many disparate groups come together to speak up for a common issue.

**Conclusion**

Building and strengthening a grassroots network should be an ongoing process for each preservation and Main Street organization. Taking part in advocacy efforts at the local, state and federal level is a great way for decision makers to keep in touch with the needs and priorities of Main Streets, local business owners, and historic preservationists. There is no limit to what can be accomplished with a strong grassroots network that understands and advocates on behalf preservation policies or adoption of revitalization tools.
Resources and Organizations

* A Blueprint for Lobbying* by Susan West Montgomery, National Trust for Historic Preservation

* Main Street Advocacy Toolkit*, Main Street America

* Lobbying 101*, National Trust for Historic Preservation

* Advocacy Resources*, American Alliance of Museums

* Everyday Advocacy Resources*, National Council of Nonprofits

* The Legislative Process*, United States House of Representatives

* What is Grassroots Advocacy?*, The National Affordable Housing Management Association
Main Street America has been helping revitalize older and historic commercial districts for 40 years. Today it is a network of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.