

Developing a Grassroots Network

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Engaging in the political process and communicating with elected officials are essential components to successfully promote historic preservation 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.

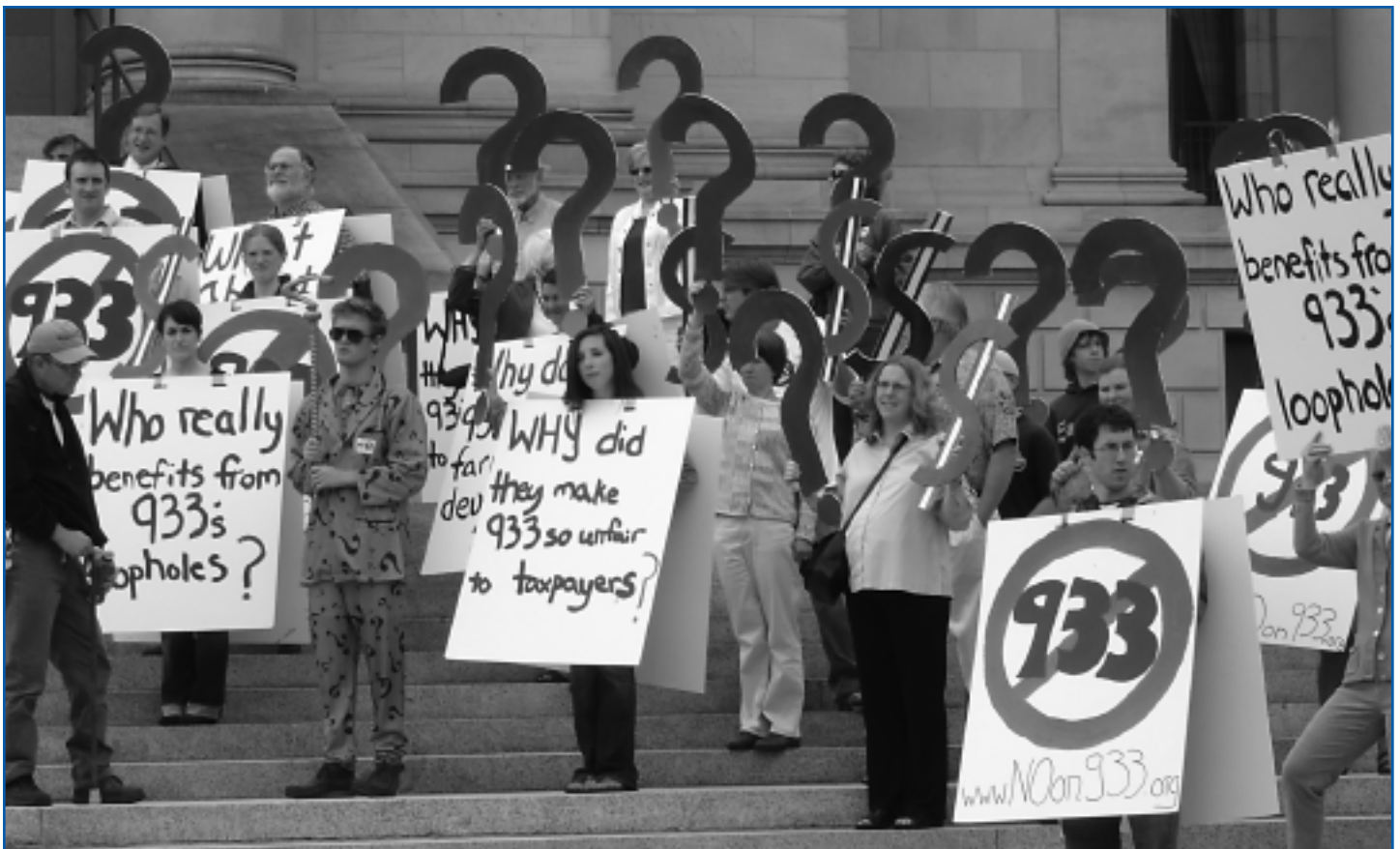
What Is Grassroots Advocacy?

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 average Americans 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



When Washington's Ballot Initiative 933 was filed last June, a grassroots coalition rallied to ask, who is going to benefit from 933's loophole?
Photo courtesy of the NO on 933 coalition.



Preservationists in Burlington, Iowa (a Great American Main Street Award winner) used the opportunity at the Main Streets Conference to strengthen their relationship with Congressman Jim Leach (R-Iowa). They interacted with him throughout his time at the conference and invited him to accept their Great American Main Street award with them. Photo by Linda Glisson.

preservation movement by engaging new audiences. People are more likely to become involved in preservation 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, inform them of the advocacy goal, select the best way to communicate and track information with advocates, and decide when and why to initiate contact with elected officials.

Who Are Advocates?

Anybody who supports 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 represents a wide-ranging and diverse constituency. In addition to targeting traditional preservation supporters, try to

involve potential preservationists by engaging bigger, issue-based coalitions that may have similar goals. Elected officials tend to respond positively to groups that represent more than one interest. Potential advocates may include:

- Statewide preservation organizations
- Main Street organizations
- Community and neighborhood organizations
- Historic sites
- State historic preservation offices
- Smart growth organizations
- Real estate/development professionals
- Architects and planners
- Environmentalists
- Chambers of Commerce
- Business owners
- Other organizations that support preservation goals

How Do You Sign Up Advocates?

Be creative in where and how you spread your message and be sure to capture the names of people who are interested in your causes whenever possible.

Some methods include:

- Exchanging mailing lists with other organizations.
- Collecting names and contact information at preservation events (a sign-up sheet and card drop can work but make sure they know how you plan to use their e-mail address so they have an option to give you the information or not).
- Using the “tell a friend” option on e-mail communications.
- Sponsoring advocacy events such as workshops, lectures, or press conferences.

Keep your advocates informed and up-to-date. Be sure to thank them for their efforts and celebrate in shared successes—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 take action 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 specific audiences while remaining consistent.

Remind grassroots advocates that thoughtful, personalized, and well-crafted communications with elected officials that include relevant preservation examples carry significant weight. Form letters and communications 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 can help you achieve your goal—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? As you develop a strategy for a legislative campaign, consider at what point or points during that campaign that it would be appropriate to engage grassroots advocates and plan accordingly. 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.

Those developing grassroots networks for preservation

must coordinate these efforts 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 mission of preservation.

Communication with advocates has to inform them both of pressing issues and also motivate them to take action. Just like lawmakers, advocates need to know how their efforts will benefit historic preservation and 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 only contact advocates for urgent matters. Be sure to keep them up-to-date on important legislation, let them know the

As part of a wide-ranging advocacy campaign, this advertisement helped defeat a bond that would fund the replacement the Bluffs Middle School in Scotts Bluff, Neb. The ad clearly identifies the reasons why citizens should care about the issue and what actions they can take. Created by Pat Power.



To help advocates make the case for keeping their historic preservation tax credit, the Michigan Historic Preservation Network developed this fact sheet detailing the economic benefits and graphically showing the change the tax credit has made to historic buildings. Courtesy of Michigan Historic Preservation Network.

outcome of your advocacy requests, and always thank them for acting on behalf of an issue.

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

- **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 e-mail that can be used to call advocates into action.

- **Feedback**—A mechanism 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. 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.

Conclusion

To ensure passage or adoption of preservation policies, building and strengthening a grassroots network should be an ongoing process. Taking part in advocacy efforts on the local, state, and federal level is a great way to keep in touch with the needs and priorities of preservationists. There is no limit to what can be accomplished with a strong grassroots network that understands and can advocate on behalf of the importance of historic preservation.

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Resources and Links

A Blueprint for Lobbying

by Susan West Montgomery
National Trust for Historic Preservation
www.preservationbooks.org

Advocacy Guru

Advocacy Associates, LLC.
www.advocacyguru.com

Effective Communications for Preservation Nonprofit Organizations

by Richard McPherson, Debra Ashmore, and Timothy Oleary
National Trust for Historic Preservation
www.preservationbooks.org

The National Trust Center for State and Local Policy helps preservationists influence policy makers in their own communities through training, technical assistance, and promotion of effective advocacy tools. This publication is part of the Center's *Advocacy Training Manual*. To receive assistance with your policy issue, the latest information on advocacy techniques, or to order additional copies of this chapter, e-mail the National Trust Center for State and Local Policy at policy@nthp.org, call 202-588-6167, or visit www.nationaltrust.org/advocacy. This project is made possible, in part, through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.