

# **Advocating: A Primer**

*You Can Fight City Hall!*

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by

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## In the Beginning



### **Pick an issue you are passionate about.**

One person or one group can't tackle everything; you will give up on such an overwhelming task.

Start with an issue you have a personal interest in. You have to care passionately about the issue when you are advocating for it.

In my case, 20 years ago, I was a working mother who found it hard to find daycare. Improved and more daycare, whether in a home or in a center, became my issue.

### **Research**

You may think you know what the problem is and what the solutions are, but you may be wrong. You certainly will not know all the ins and outs of the issue.

Research the history of the issue. Use the public library, the Internet (careful here about information quality), people you know who have been involved in the issue for some time. Municipal websites are often fonts of information. My Region of Waterloo puts up meeting minutes, reports, and general information.

I got to know the women working for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and discovered that the same daycare issues had been around since the 1960s. And I'm working on the same issues today in my role as a Regional Councillor!

Find out what works, what needs to be changed and improved. Find out what the experts think needs to be done to make things better. **It will always involve more money!**

Most importantly, get to know the people you are trying to help and include them in. In my case, it was the teachers and parents from our and other daycares, the women running home childcare, single mothers and welfare mothers, at home mothers needing parenting relief and support.

### **Input Meetings**

Municipalities will have open meetings or forums about projects or issues where you will sit in small groups and give your opinion., These can be VERY IMPORTANT, not a waste of time. Often this is where the changes and real decisions start. I recently attended a forum on graffiti prevention that had presentations by successful cities and enormous and wide ranging citizen input. The ideas raised are going to be used by police, region and city to get a handle on the problem.

Roads projects must have public meetings by law. Often these are in the form of maps and staff who you can talk to one on one. Fill out the input form. Staff put together all the comments for councillors to read. I have seen roads projects totally changed due to public input.

### **Group Dynamics**

Make sure your group works together. Do a lot of cheerleading. Have social events. Make sure you keep minutes and learn to run a meeting properly. Respect differing opinions within your organization but don't lose sight of the goal with infighting.

### **Ignorance of the difficulties you will encounter is a good thing.**

When a group of parents and me decided to build a non-profit daycare, we had no idea that it couldn't be done, that we might go bankrupt, that people would be downright hostile. We just went ahead and did it.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't be aware that things can grow wrong, just don't end up paralyzed by them.

### **Know your enemies. Where are they coming from?**

You may think that your issue is pretty much a no-brainer as a good cause but not everyone will.

Some will be actually hostile.

Don't expect to change the opinions of hard liners but remember that other people are listening to you speak and your words are sinking in with them. A powerful, aggressive enemy may not be challenged by others with a stake in keeping him or her happy. This doesn't mean that those other people haven't heard what you say.

In daycare, those of us advocating for it knew that women were working outside the home, that they had to work and weren't quitting, that terrible things were happening to their children with unsupervised babysitters.

Our opponents were some women at home with children, some men who felt women should stay home and not compete for their jobs, older women who had raised their children, often in poverty.

The women at home felt threatened by the attitude in society that they were doing nothing when at home and weren't worthwhile unless a monetary value was put to their work. Instead of tackling this wrong societal attitude, they tackled other women.

All three groups were threatened by change. Our society has changed rapidly in the last 50 years and change can easily overwhelm. The past seems rosy, but a lot of problems were kept secret, people shamed that the problem was their fault.

There are two types of people to my mind.

Those who have had a hard time and survived. They feel that those presently going through the problem should just tough it out like they did.

The second person says, I had a really hard time going through or coping with this problems and no one else should have to suffer this way.

It is important to remember the following: Sympathetic men can be better allies than some women, sometimes women are their own worst enemies, women have a range of opinions.

**They can lie and cheat and distort but you must not.**

Occasionally, a few people against your cause will lie about your purposes, give out wrong information, say bad things about you personally. Do not do the same. Take the high road, give out the correct information. Don't let these people hijack your cause with their issues, keep to your original message.

If you are asking people to give testimonials (the press likes human interest), for instance a single mother talking about her struggles, make sure the person is aware that people may write nasty things about them in the paper, may phone them up, talk behind their back. Members of their own family may be upset at them appearing in the media and "airing their dirty linen".

Also mention to your "human interest story" person how this will help them and others in the end.

## Getting your message out.



### The Media

The media can be your best friend and your enemy.

The media are key for any cause. If no one knows a problem exists, how can it be solved?

If you are having an event or going as a delegation to a council or parliamentary committee, make sure the press knows. Send a press release to all the media, T.V., radio, newspapers. Follow

up with a phone call.

Get to know the reporters who are interested and sympathetic in your issue. Know which reporter (and they rotate) covers your issue. For instance, there is one K.W. Record reporter who covers Regional issues, one Queen's park, one City council.

You will be interviewed, you will appear on T.V., you will have to make speeches. You need some sound bites.

One of the best we had, when the council supported the Seagram Museum instead of the daycare, made a headline.

Our supervisor said, *Council supports booze not babies.*

If you can't put yourself in front of the public, there are other ways to help.

Write letters to the editor or second opinion pieces. Send around a petition. Make sure you are one of the bodies who turn up to support your spokesperson. A full gallery means a lot to politicians and the media. It says voters are passionate enough to turn up for this issue.

A special note, if your organization is a charity, you cannot lobby as their representative. They could lose their charitable status. Create another group for lobbying.

If you decide to have a rally or protest, remember that this is a media event to show that lots of people are for your cause and also to spread your information, not an opportunity for confrontation.

The media can also hurt your cause. A bad editorial or opinion piece needs polite letters to the editor. The press must print opposing views, so you should also politely demand an opinion piece when necessary.

T.V. news programs tend to be a little more homogenous. The biggest problem is being ignored.

Newspapers are not all alike. The National Post is Reform, the Toronto Star is Liberal, Globe and Mail conservative.

Money talks. At one point the K.W. Record printed so many negative stories about teachers that there was a mass cancellation of subscriptions. The stories moderated after that.

### **Other things to do to Spread the Word.**

Start a web site with information about your cause, the media will use it for background if you give them the address. Put the address on all your literature. Start a mailing list and an E-mail group for support and discussion of your issue.

Don't forget to start a Facebook group about your cause.

Explore people and organizations who will give your grants to carry out your advocacy work. Get companies interested in your cause to donate money.

As you grow, hire staff people to work full or part time on your cause. It is too much to ask volunteers with busy lives to do everything.

Talk about your cause when appropriate. In your work, get involved in your professional organizations, work for your union, get involved in your church, the YWCA. The Chamber of Commerce.

Join a political party and become involved, going to the conventions and bringing up your issue at the appropriate workshops. During an election, support politicians who are for your cause with money, volunteering, and your vote. Hold politicians accountable to your issue.



## **Politicians are "just folks"**

### **The Stereotype**

I'm always amused, but also a bit annoyed, by people who refer to politicians as if they were a separate species.

Like all stereotypes, these are wrong. Politicians are not good or evil. While it is an important part of democracy to keep a cynical eye on those who run your city or your country, it is important to remember that politicians are your neighbors who are elected by you, not a bunch of distant overlords. Politicians I know are teachers, business people, librarians, social workers, writers, housewives, computer programmers, contractors, farmers, you get the idea.

We scoop our dog's poop along with everyone else. Actually, probably more of a scooper since I don't want to read in the paper, "Regional councillor charged with leaving dog droppings."

When you are a delegation, it's O.K. to be nervous. You can say you're nervous or this is the first time you've been a delegation. Most councillors will ask good questions, but occasionally one will want to argue with you. They aren't supposed to, but some chairs aren't as good at controlling the meeting as they should be.

You may also feel frustrated when politicians discuss your issue, just don't get it and the rules say you can't speak again.

.If politicians say "No" to your request it doesn't mean they haven't listened. They have listened, they just said, "No." (Parents of teen-agers will understand this concept.)

### **Things that tick politicians off.**

Speaking down to them as if they are stupid and you know it all.

Having person after person present with the same information, it's better for most of them to be part of the audience.

Speaking angrily instead of with reason.

Name calling.

Lying or distorting. We're not dumb.

Attacking individual politicians or administrators instead of sticking to your issue (the papers love a war between personalities)

Reacting to an article in the media without getting the complete story from the government side. You still can feel the same, but at least you know both sides.

Phoning a politician and speaking rudely about the politician, other politicians or administrative staff.

Not giving your name.

Telling a politician in a threatening tone that you and your supporters voted for them and so the politician should do exactly what you want or you won't vote for them next time. (We know that every issue has people on all sides.) Also threatening to sue. We've heard that before and we have high priced lawyers on staff who deal with such things.

Sending letters to everyone except the politician you need to talk to. If they don't know about the problem, they can't fix it.

Presentations that turn what they are against into the boogie man . e.g. Saying those who are against pesticides are environmental nuts and, on the other side, calling lawn maintenance people evil businessmen only in it for the money.

Using "the sky is falling" tactic. e.g. Widening a road will destroy the environment when the road is going through a field in the middle of a subdivision.

**Many councils forbid the following types of interactions to stop a riot breaking out in the chamber. They also annoy the politicians:**

Supporters booing a decision.

Calling out opinions while politicians are deliberating. (I have been told that Hell fire awaits me!)

Clapping for a delegation.

Throwing leaflets.

Holding up signs.

Speaking negatively about a specific staff member. This is a personnel issue and should be in camera.

**Things that help to put a politician on your side.**

Politeness.

Reasoned presentations that don't go over the time limit.

Having your facts correct because you have phoned government staff or politicians before hand.

Individual stories (a few tears don't hurt. Kids always go over well.)

Pictures of a program.

A short video

A tour of your project or an invitation to a function or workshop about your issue.

Writing or e-mail campaigns with individualized, not form letters. Don't have everyone in your group send the same letter. If they are e-mails it becomes almost like spam. Have everyone use their own words, then put in the address of your website for more information.

While petitions are useful tools, many politicians don't give a person signing their name as much attention as a flurry of personalized e-mails. Facebook and website petitions are particularly suspect because they are so easy for people to sign. Personally, I put stock in web petitions because a person must have an interest in the subject to visit the site or they wouldn't fill out the form. In our automated world, don't send a bunch of identical e-mails that are obviously from a mailing list of a website. It approaches spam.

Write us an e-mail. Almost all politicians have Blackberries these days and the message goes right to us with a buzz to let us know a message has arrived. 90 percent of my contact with constituents is by e-mail.

Do not keep writing to us over and over about a problem when you have been given the solution to the problem. This is a tricky one to get the meaning across, since we want you to write to us about such things as university students leaving their garbage about and that happens over and over. For example, if council has passed a pesticide by-law, don't keep sending e-mails with your side of the issue when the issue is done for this term.

Personal phone calls work very well. Don't forget to leave messages on answering machines. Phone again at a different time if the call isn't returned. Children and other family members can wipe off messages or not pass them along! (Why I like e-mail)

Here are the main ways to contact politicians in order of effectiveness, with 1 the most effective.

**1 delegation to council with supporters in audience**

**2 phone call**

**3 e-mail**

**4 mailed letter**

**5 facebook group**

**6 electronic petition**

**7 paper petition (people sign without really reading it is believed)**

A flood of 3, 4, and 5, each individualized, gets a lot of attention.

Court the noisy, always-in-the-paper politician to your side for press but don't forget the quiet ones. The noisy politicians are often resented by the others on council, the power broker (the person who will get you the votes for your motion to pass) will be among the quiet politicians.

Make sure you contact all the politicians, even those who are against you. Talking to those against you will give you the opinions that need to be countered in your presentation.

If the politicians do what you want, send a thank you note or a give them a thank you phone call. (No gifts, of course) It is maybe once a term that someone comes and thanks council.

If you are given money or permission, come at a non-budget time and give a good news presentation, showing the politicians how their actions have helped their constituents. Make sure the media also know. On a slow news night, good news will be aired.

**Delegations I have particularly liked.**

The man who sang a song about the environment. (Don't do this, other councillors didn't find it credible)

The delegations that showed their passion and expertise about trains.

The disabled man who took two hours to come to the council chamber to talk about bus schedules. (Just arriving really made his point)

Children with drawings about the environment.

The developers that gave us a computer fly through of their project.

## **A Note on Provincial and Federal Politics.**



Provincial and Federal members like to hear from their constituents, so be sure to make an appointment to see your riding member personally. If speaking to a committee of parliament, make sure you have constituents of the members on the committee speaking about your issue.

Professional lobbyists are good to help you out, but politicians like to hear from regular constituents.

(Thanks to Honourable Karen Redman for this section)

### **Run for office yourself.**

Many politicians have become interested in running for office because of an issue. You will become interested in many more concerns than your original one.

I advocated for childcare, moving to school board trustee made sense and I already had recognition. Now my daughters are grown up and being a regional councillor is a good fit. Though, surprise, I'm back speaking for childcare again, this time with a vote at the Regional table.

Many politicians have run and lost many times before they got in. If you don't win, you will have an opportunity to raise awareness of things near and dear to your heart. If you make a good showing, the elected politicians will steal some of your ideas and change will come.

Don't be a one issue candidate.

For more information on running, go to [www.learnhowtorun.com](http://www.learnhowtorun.com)

## Burnout



We've all heard that women, especially, should learn to say "No" to requests for help.

I want to say here that you should also say "Yes." Saying "Yes" changed my life, gave it more depth, made it worthwhile.

I did suffer from burn out at one time, and it was a revelation.

In 1999, My mother passed away from cancer and we helped her die at home. I was working on my business, as a librarian, as a school trustee, as a writer and as a wife and mother. Yet at the time, I did not understand that I was burned out. (Reading this years after writing it, I am thinking, "Was I mad? I can't believe I was doing all that!")

I eventually left my librarian job to work on my business and stopped being a school trustee.

Surprise, when I became a Regional Councillor, my burnout disappeared and politics was fun again. As a school trustee, I had gone from a board that had power and could raise taxes to one that was changed by the provincial government of the day to a board that was little more than a parent council to provincial fiats --- no taxing or money raising power, no say on programs. Yet trustees had to fund and run a school system and take the fall for anything going wrong.

### **Signs of burnout.**

You snap at your family or ignore them.

You feel overloaded.

You hate things you used to live for. Life isn't fun anymore.

You turn to food, alcohol, drugs, T.V. ,exercise, etc. in excess.

You stop doing your best, even doing your average.

You don't care anymore, even becoming hostile to those you once supported.

You get sick.

You can't sleep or sleep too much.

You don't look after your appearance.

## **Some ending thoughts.**

Lack of power to change things causes stress, burnout and depression.

Working as an advocate can give you power.

Persistence is more important than perfection.

Governments change.

Public opinion can be altered.

Change comes in small steps. In fact, some say that change sticks better when done in small steps. Do a reality check by looking back to see how far you have come.

**You can fight city hall!**