

Legislator Tested, Legislator Approved: Practical Advice to Connect with Your Constituents

NCSL Workshop, August 2013

Description of Legislator Practices

Background and Overview

Legislators are very interested in connecting with their constituents. Strong connections help legislators keep a pulse on the district, make better policy decisions, solve constituents' problems and gain political allies. Lawmakers often express general interest in connecting with their constituents, but there have been barriers to creating more deliberative interactions with citizens, including a legislator's lack of time, funding, priority, facilitation skills and credible partners; a sense of the limits of what can be accomplished; and a distrust of the process and outcome. Further, most legislators tend to see these kinds of constituent discussions as "nice to do" but not "need to do" priorities. Providing constituent service and traditional outreach are often seen as the point of emphasis.

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the Kettering Foundation (KF) are working together on a project to study these legislator/citizen connections. In particular, we will be looking at methods legislators are using to engage citizens in more meaningful and deliberative ways than usual, including the thoughtful and civil discussion of diverse perspectives, examination of the difficulties and trade-offs of all approaches, and identification of common ground. The project will focus on helping legislators find practical and meaningful ways to have discussions with their constituents.

In the past year of the project NCSL has prioritized the process of identifying and observing promising legislative practices and sharing information about those practices in meetings and workshops and through publications and NCSL's website. Also, NCSL is continuing to provide joint learning opportunities with legislators, legislative staff, KF and their associates. NCSL will study all these activities and report on what we have learned about legislator/citizen connection practices. Bruce Feustel and Angela Andrews are the NCSL staff working on the project.

Identifying and Observing Promising Legislative Practices

Much of our work over the past year has been to identify and observe practices the legislators themselves identify as being practical, doable and successful in making more meaningful connections with their constituents. We observed citizen engagement practices in Hawaii, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Massachusetts and Wyoming in the past year:

1. Hawaii Legislators Connected to Communities

Treating Citizens as Partners

Senator Les Ihara, Jr., sees collaborating with communities as the normal thing for legislators to do. “I came into the legislature as a community organizer, so I just naturally looked for people to connect and collaborate with. Plus, Hawaii has a culture and tradition of talking and working things out together.” This background has led Les to join forces with others to have legislator partnering retreats and hold community discussion forums on hot topics like gambling, death with dignity, and telecommunications. “The power of open communication, of thinking together, is tremendous. Using this approach really works, helps us make breakthroughs on hard choices.”

Senator Susie Chun Oakland was at a conference in New York state with elected officials from other states more than two decades ago and spoke with a legislator who had mentioned a children’s caucus made up of legislators. She loved the idea and believed that there was a better way to streamline issues and identify more unified proposals that positively affected children. As a House member, she felt that elected officials were always introducing competing bills relating to children and she and fellow lawmakers had no good process to assess what was best. Coming back to Hawaii and working with Representative Dennis Arakaki, they developed a unique children’s caucus approach, inviting children’s advocates, various non-profits, educators, youth, parent groups, researchers, legislators, agency officials and other experts working together to develop policy, launching the Keiki (children’s) Caucus in 1990.

Similarly, at the suggestion of Speaker Calvin Say and Minority Member Cynthia Thielen at a Silver Legislature, Senator Chun Oakland and Representative Arakaki helped start the Kupuna (elders) caucus in 2005.

Keiki and Kupuna Caucuses

The Keiki and Kupuna caucuses function informally, but use the power and insights of all who participate in their work. The Keiki caucus uses monthly meetings to shape a legislative agenda and focus on events like Children and Youth Day in the Capitol. Last year’s event brought together more than 50,000 people to enjoy games, activities and hands-on learning. The caucus’s legislative package over the years has addressed the state minimum wage, family leave, education funding, teachers’ salaries, early childhood education, health insurance and care, grandparent caregivers and child protection.

The advocates, legislators, officials, citizens and others who comprise the caucus met recently and discussed the benefits they get from participating in the caucus approach:

- “We get direct access to legislators.”
- “We develop a legislative package with the breadth of the knowledge and experience of the whole group.”
- “I have a chance to understand everyone’s point of view. We take the time to talk things through, so we really do learn what others are thinking.”
- “Our legislators are able to bring people in to answer our questions---that wouldn’t happen without them.”

- “Our ideas are improved by going through this reviewing process. Good ideas get stronger, other ideas are put aside. This way we strengthen our legislative package and find the important priorities.”

Legislators benefit too. The other caucus members “are my eyes and ears” says Senator Chun Oakland. “I understand the issues more completely when we involve the community and the people who will implement the law. We always come up with a better bill than we legislators could create on our own. Plus, the process identifies the most informed people to provide testimony when the time comes.”

The Kupuna Caucus operates somewhat similarly by having advocates, officials, citizens and lawmakers jointly identify and address the issues of the aging. Using an informal discussion approach to their meeting, the Kupuna Caucus recently talked about current senior issues including the training of bank employees to recognize potential financial crimes targeting the elderly. What seemed different from meetings held in other legislatures was the interplay of the executive branch, legislators, the University of Hawaii and citizens in the discussion. Everyone’s opinion was welcomed and particular attention was made to ensure the impact on the neighbor islands was being considered. One example of collaboration from last session was the Kupuna Caucus’s use of teams of one caregiver and one policy expert to meet with legislators when key legislation was being considered.

Lawmakers Listen

Hawaii House Democrats have also developed a different approach to legislator town hall meetings. In 2002 they launched the “Lawmakers Listen” program whereby freshmen legislators hold a community meeting in their district during the election year and they bring with them the majority leader and at least one committee chair. They use a team effort among the individual representative, leadership, the applicable chair, and majority, communication and the representative’s staff. The representative will act as a moderator for the community meeting, set the topic and send out the invitations. Representative Linda Ichiyama went door to door in her district to drum up interest for her “Lawmakers Listen” meeting. The leadership and chairs go to the meeting to discuss key issues from the session, but they are also available to tackle some of the tough questions that involve explaining how they made difficult or unpopular choices. The majority staff provide helpful background information on the issues to be discussed at the meeting and Georgette Deemer of the communications office provides training, including videotaping, to help the new legislators prepare. “They may be uncomfortable being taped and surprised at how they appear on video, but nobody gets better without practice.”

The key, according to former House Majority Leader Pono Chong, is that “the less we (legislators) talk, the better these meetings work. People may just need to vent, but whatever their reason, the important thing is that we listen.” Representative Ichiyama appreciated the team approach. “Having leadership there allowed me to focus on my role and doing it well. My mom made her chili and that helped make this a welcoming event, especially as many people came to the meeting from work. It was a great way to reach out to the community and hear their concerns.”

Tips

Hawaii legislators have some helpful suggestions looking for new ways to connect with their fellow citizens:

- Meeting as a legislative team in community meetings helps reduce the pressure for new legislators. More experienced members can tackle the tough questions and everyone can concentrate on his or her role at the meeting.
- The hardest part of “Lawmakers Listen” may be setting the meeting dates. With so many busy people involved, you have to start the date-setting process well ahead of time.
- Using caucuses (children, elderly, women or other) that mix legislators, advocates, officials and citizens stresses cooperation and communication. It identifies priorities, builds a stronger, more credible legislative package and “puts everyone on the same page.”
- The caucus approach gives everyone a chance to develop leadership skills. Different issues call for different caucus members to head the effort at different times.
- Involving the university helps create a continuous stream of new blood in the caucus activities. It’s not unusual for an interested student to come to a caucus meeting and eventually become a legislative staffer, an advocate or an executive branch employee.
- Tell your citizens about their role in the legislative process. Hawaii has a Public Access Room at the capitol and its website provides a video entitled “We the Powerful” that explains how citizens can participate (<http://hawaii.gov/lrb/par/>). Also the access room employees make presentations on the topic across the state to citizen gatherings.
- “Be genuine,” says Senator Chun Oakland. Get involved with these groups if you have a passion for the work. People will figure out if you are only participating for your own political purposes.”

2. Kansas Legislator Connecting with Education Experts

Legislators want to hear from all their constituents, but sometimes they hold meetings targeting specific issues and groups. For example, a legislator might meet just with hunters, business owners or commuters in the legislator’s district to get a sense of the group’s interests and priorities. These meetings put the legislator in a better position to advocate for the group when bills come up during the session. Also, attendance is better and the discussion is richer when people have a strong interest in the meeting topic.

Senator Elaine Bowers set up a specifically targeted meeting in advance of the 2013 legislative session in Kansas. Knowing that she would face tough educational policy votes in the Senate, she wanted the input of the key officials in her large rural district. After leaving the Kansas House to seek election to the Senate, much of her district was new to her. She needed to build relationships with the area school district superintendents and community college presidents, wanting the benefit of their thinking headed into the session. “Most of them don’t know me yet, but I need to make a strong connection with them so that they will tell me their problems and priorities. I want them to trust me and understand that I don’t have any agenda on education other than doing what’s best for the students, and these superintendents and presidents are the experts. I want them to know I will take their message to Topeka.”

Senator Bowers wanted to set up a “get to know each other” meeting where she would bring in some state and national experts on education, get the superintendents talking and have herself say a few words about how she wanted to keep listening and communicating with them. The experts were expected to provide relevant information and trends, but they would also show the superintendents that a legislator could use

her authority to bring in additional expert assistance on any subject. She chose centrally located Mankato as the spot for an 11:30 am – 1:30 pm meeting with lunch at “The Buffalo Roam,” a popular local restaurant.

The first speaker, State Department of Education Deputy Director Dale Dennis, described an education funding picture that is harsh---although general funding for education may hold steady, tobacco settlement funding, which school districts have relied on recently, is ending. The funding issues clearly dwarfed all others for the superintendents and college presidents and sparked comments from the group:

- The state is expecting that online teaching will clearly reduce costs. We’re willing to use online options where it makes sense, but there are some things, like auto mechanics, that require the student to be with the teacher or expert, at least for some of the time.
- We are constantly looking for joint district learning opportunities. Meetings like this give us a chance to find out more about what everyone is doing.
- Transportation costs kill us on some of these courses where we have to get a few students into a neighboring district for a class. There has to be a cheaper alternative that will pass muster with the state education department.
- A new program at one of the community colleges with wind energy-related courses has great practical potential for area students.

Other speakers provided state and national perspectives on teacher effectiveness and workforce training. Overall, the meeting was a powerful first step for Senator Bowers. The discussion was fruitful and she got a better sense of the rural schools’ problems and priorities. The participants appreciated being asked to participate and to give her their thoughts, several of them staying long past 1:30 to talk with each other and her. She hopes to make this a regular conversation and that the superintendents and presidents will see her as a problem solver and an ally. Although she wants to communicate with all of her constituents, Senator Bowers sees the benefit of creating special discussions with her district’s education experts so she can be ready for the tough legislative decisions on education priorities and funding that lie ahead.

Tips

- Use the time after an election but before the session begins to connect with key groups in your district.
- Find a central meeting location that is accessible on main roads. This is especially true when it is winter time.
- Get the word out early about your meeting. Your participants are busy people who need to plan ahead.
- Bring in some state and national experts that will make the event a special draw.
- Give your group a meal and some time to relax and chat before you begin the main program.
- Tell the group how their ideas will help you be a better legislator back in the Capitol.
- Always take time for open-ended questions. They may be concerned about something that doesn’t relate to the planned program.

- Stress that you want to build a relationship with the participants. Having a discussion like this isn't a "one and done" deal.
- Don't be in a rush to leave after the meeting. Someone always has an issue to talk about with you that he isn't comfortable raising in front of the others.

3. Business Owner Roundtable in Rural, Remote Colorado

Senator Ellen Roberts explains that 88% of Colorado's population is in the "Front Range" area that stretches from Fort Collins to Pueblo. As a result, senate districts like hers in the rural, remote area of the state that reaches to the Four Corners where Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona all connect may face extra hurdles in dealings with state government. In particular, business owners can be frustrated working with state agency officials and employees who may have little understanding of the challenges in their part of the state.

Senator Roberts and her Senate Republican Caucus colleagues have established the roundtable discussion approach to promote better communication and problem solving for the business owners and the state officials. Leading the roundtable in Durango on September 20, 2012, jointly with Assistant Minority Leader Mark Scheffel, the two senators described the value of knowing the practical impact of laws and regulations on business. Senator Scheffel indicated that this was not a case of all regulations being bad---some are important for health, safety and other reasons. The key is to determine what is unfairly or unproductively hindering business. Nor was this a strongly partisan appeal, as "we have to do much of our work in cooperation with the other party." They encouraged the attendees to speak about real life experiences---what was working well and what needs to be improved. Senator Roberts told them that "when we are debating these business issues, it is your stories that come back to me and I can share them with my colleagues, showing what the real impact is on the ground."

About 25 business owners participated, representing accounting, health service, real estate, restaurant, electrical and other services. The legislators asked for their challenges and the owners provided a series of problems with Department of Revenue (DOR) regulation compliance, inability to speak with "a live person," and the delays caused whenever you have to send in anything in writing as opposed to electronically. They showed their frustration when they described how in some situations that they were better off paying penalties that they didn't deserve rather than spend the time and energy fighting a disputed payment.

The owners had some understanding of the DOR's position, as the agency has been dealing with budget cuts. "Maybe we should restore some of that funding," was one of the comments, as "we seem to have lost some of the people you could rely on to help resolve problems." Senator Scheffel asked the group if there were any lessons to be learned from the owners' dealings with the other state governments in the Four Corners area ---New Mexico, Utah and Arizona. One owner mentioned how Utah has designed the tax "due dates" to occur at the same time, which makes reporting easier, while another mentioned that in New Mexico if there are tax issues, you can always get someone at their revenue department on the phone who can help.

This is a trying time for owners, as health insurance and other costs are skyrocketing. The theme of the conversation was generally positive, however. Roundtable participants appreciated the chance to describe their situations and asked to be included in discussions in the future.

Tips

- Start the roundtable by explaining how important it is for you to listen to the participants and how you will use what you hear back in the capitol. Keep it informal (“we’re Ellen and Mark, not Senator”) and try to encourage them to talk. Although many of the participants are used to these meetings, some are new to the experience.
- Work with your local chambers of commerce, as they are a natural connection for these kinds of conversation. In general, look to existing organizations to help organize and promote roundtables or other discussions.
- If you can, bring a member of your caucus from another part of the state to a business owner roundtable to show that other legislators have concern for them and their problems. Further, it shows that all the state appreciates businesses that provide jobs and needed services and that take the risks of ownership in tough economic times. If you can bring a well-respected leader, all the better.
- As a legislator you need input from various sources. Town hall meetings with a broad range of viewpoints are critical, but so are meetings with groups of similar people, like business owners and teachers. These focused roundtables make participants comfortable and they can respond to and expand on each other’s comments.
- Understand the political realities, but make every participant feel welcome and respected. As a Republican, Senator Roberts might expect that most business owners at the roundtable would be fellow party members, but certainly not all of them. Further, good ideas can come from a variety of sources, so you have to constantly be paying attention to what you hear. Lastly, in Colorado, you almost always will need some bi-partisan support to be successful in getting your bill passed.
- Identify “good stories.” Recognize when you hear a constituent tell a story that will help explain your point to your legislative colleagues. In a prior roundtable Sen. Roberts heard a story of the impact that a recent towing bond law had for a business owner in rural, remote Colorado. The new law was driven by interests in the major metropolitan parts of the state, and the story showed how frustrating the change was in human terms for this owner in her district. Legislators have to be on the lookout for these stories, and often need to ask the roundtable participants to write up their perspective and send it to the legislator.
- When you finish the roundtable, clearly show you are accessible: “Don’t wait for me to call you if you think I need to know something, please call me” she tells them at the end.
- Work with your caucus staff. In Colorado, legislators have no personal staff. In this meeting the Senate Republican Caucus staffers were able to take notes and provide answers to some of the questions, freeing the legislators to facilitate the discussion and focus on and listen to what people were saying.
- Plan on staying a while after the meeting has ended. Some participants will have things to tell you privately or just want to have some personal time with you.

4. New Mexico Neighborhood Association Meetings – “Go Where They Are”

Neighborhood associations are an integral part of Albuquerque, New Mexico’s political and civic scene. These associations have the ability to develop, protect and enhance their neighborhood and they are extremely active. For Representative Rick Miera, these neighborhood associations are a vital part of his citizen engagement and constituent outreach efforts. He’s been regularly attending these meetings since first being elected to the New Mexico House of Representatives, more than 20 years ago. He represents 13 different neighborhood associations in the downtown Albuquerque area and attends each association meeting on a regular basis. As with each neighborhood, each association has its own identity, issues and challenges. Representative Miera is intimately familiar and knowledgeable about each neighborhood association.

The Downtown Neighborhood Association meeting observation

The first Wednesday of every month the Albuquerque Downtown Neighborhood Association meets at the Harwood Art Center. At their meeting on September 5, 2012 there were about 25 people in attendance, including seven board members and Representative Miera, who is a member of this neighborhood association as a resident of the downtown neighborhood.

The meeting started promptly at 7:00 pm, after everyone pitched in to set up tables and chairs for the meeting and Representative Miera helped to troubleshoot and turn off a leaky air conditioner that had flooded a portion of the room. There was an agenda for the meeting and topics of discussion ranged from inviting the association to participate in a parade, hearing a report from the Albuquerque Police Department and listening to a presentation about bringing street cars to the downtown area. Representative Miera sat quietly in the audience, listening to each agenda item being discussed. He only spoke to present information on the local Albuquerque parade or when asked a question. He was praised by the association for his help in securing “doggy poop bags” for the local park, a task that has eluded the association for quite some time.

Even though Representative Miera’s speaking role was minimal, his presence was felt. The association looked at him, and referred to him and the possibility of securing funding “from Santa Fe,” during the presentation and discussion of the potential downtown street car project.

Representative Miera stresses the importance and value of the neighborhood association meetings to his engagement efforts. Instead of him organizing the meeting, including the time, place, agenda and promotion, he “goes where his constituents are.” These are ready-made meetings where he can hear about the local issues, meet his constituents and listen to them while they engage with each other and share their opinions. At these meetings, Representative Miera listens, assesses the problems, considers the solutions and builds relationships with his constituents. Also, as he says, if you don’t have a neighborhood association that you can attend on a regular basis, create one and go where they are.

Tips

- **Listen first, act later and be strategic**
Listen to the dialogue and pay attention for opportunities where you can provide assistance. Learn all sides of the story before you make a decision and be strategic in your approach and efforts.
- **Know when to say yes and when to say no**
Understand and be clear about what you **will do** and what you **will not do**. For example, Representative Miera will help to connect people, but he will not get in the middle once people are connected. Also, he's clear that he will not get people jobs.
- **Accept the value of being open**
These ready-made meetings might feel like a forum for unpredictable questions. Be open to any questions the group may have and be honest about your ability to answer the question on the spot or follow-up at a later date.
- **Let the group do the work**
Serve as a teacher and a mentor and make the group self-reliant. Representative Miera provides guidance and advice to each neighborhood association, but only when asked. In addition, he will only become involved in projects when the association has exhausted every other option, or if he needs to remove the logjam.
- **Start small and test it out**
Do you know of a few neighborhood associations or similar groups in your district that meets monthly, every other month or quarterly? Attend one meeting – to observe, listen and engage – before attending more meetings. Think about whether it is a fit for you to attend regularly.

5. Representative Jay Kaufman's OPEN HOUSE forum

For 18 years, Massachusetts State Representative Jay Kaufman's OPEN HOUSE has been a staple in his community and district. It's an opportunity for him to bring in experts to talk about a state-wide issue – sometimes controversial – and enables him to engage in a productive dialogue with his constituents. Kaufman serves as moderator and forum facilitator. He asks guests questions and takes questions from the audience. He says that organizing and facilitating the forum gives him an opportunity to hear from his constituents and be accessible, visible and accountable to them.

The OPEN HOUSE forum is held once a month at the historic Depot in downtown Lexington, Massachusetts. The forum always starts at 7:00 pm and ends on or about 8:30 pm. It is usually scheduled for the third Thursday of every month. The OPEN HOUSE season runs from September to June and the dates and general topic ideas for each forum are determined at the beginning of the season. The forum is taped for later broadcast by the local cable access station (LexMedia). It is also archived on the LexMedia website for future on-demand viewings. Even though the forum topics are determined at the beginning of each season, Kaufman gives himself some flexibility to change the topic, pending the development of a “hot button” or current issue. As Kaufman puts it, having a timely topic keeps the OPEN HOUSE fresh

and relevant. For example, the November 2012 OPEN HOUSE examined the 2012 elections and the forum took place about two weeks after the election.

Planning in earnest for each OPEN HOUSE forum begins about three months out when Kaufman and his staff identify and invite guest speakers. Even with advance planning of inviting speakers, there are times when a speaker isn't confirmed until the last minute. That's what happened for the November 2012 OPEN HOUSE. Kaufman invited chairs of both the Massachusetts Republican and Democratic state parties. While the Democratic chairman confirmed his attendance, the Republican chairman did not confirm his attendance. It wasn't until the day before the OPEN HOUSE that a speaker representing the Republican point-of-view for this forum was confirmed. In addition to inviting guests, Kaufman's staffers are responsible for prepping his guests for the forum and relaying logistical information about the meeting (time, location, topic of discussion).

Another staff responsibility is to promote the monthly forum. The weekly paper in Lexington prints the press release announcing each forum and Kaufman uses his website, social media and email list to promote each month's meeting.

Kaufman's staff also help to set topics for the OPEN HOUSE season. His staff of three say it's a collaborative and evolving process, and Kaufman wants his staff to offer suggestions and ideas that are of interest to them as well as his district. His staff are also responsible for the logistics of the forum, such as ensuring that the room is set up properly, there is adequate parking for all attendees and the media equipment is functioning. As his staff describe, Kaufman and his guests are on a "need to know basis" once the forum starts. If there is a problem, his staff work to solve it without letting him or his guests know.

Two challenges exist with the monthly forum: getting a good turnout and bringing in new faces. As Sean Fitzgerald, Representative Kaufman's chief of staff, states, "Lexington is a forum town. There are forums happening every night. The challenge is drawing a crowd and keeping the base of attendees, but expanding out." For the November 2012 OPEN HOUSE, there were about 90 attendees, a bit more than the usual number of 60 attendees.

Kaufman and his staff are trying different avenues to diversify their audience. They occasionally have forums that discuss topics relevant to younger constituents and invite high school students. They are also increasing the use of technology during the forum, by using twitter to live-tweet the forum and incorporate questions from social media into conversation.

Past topics have included:

- "A conversation with Noam Chomsky"
- "Young Today, Lead Tomorrow: A Conversation with Young Citizens"
- "The Healing Power of Music"
- "Public Transportation in Greater Boston" with MBTA General Manager Richard Davey
- "Think Globally, Pay Locally: Your Property Tax Dollars at Work"
- "A Conversation with the Governor"
- "Massachusetts and National Health Insurance Reform: First Missions Accomplished, More to go"

- “Standing against Racism: A Community Conversation on Race”

Kaufman admits that he likes to switch up the content, from talking about significant policy topics, to local issues that impact his community, to also providing light-hearted and diverse forums that highlight a local singer or artist.

Kaufman feels that the rewards of holding this type of forum are many and include the intellectual exercise of framing topics, the chance to learn from and talk with some very smart and experienced guests, the satisfaction of facilitating and encouraging public discourse on important issues, and the reputation of being available and engaged with his constituents.

Tips:

- **Provide consistency, but be flexible**

Organizing and planning this type of forum requires discipline and consistency, but also flexibility. Consistency is important for the date, time and list of topics for the forum establishing a pattern your constituents can follow. This approach eliminates the constant need for vigilance for planning at every moment. However, understanding the need to be flexible on certain items, such as the guest speakers and the conversation, can make for a dynamic forum with engaging conversation. When asked about holding the 2012 November OPEN HOUSE, if they were unable to find the Republican perspective, Kaufman said the forum would have happened, regardless of having the counter perspective.

- **Use staff**

Staff is key to making Kaufman’s forum a success. They handle all the logistics of the meeting, from initial planning to day-of responsibilities. The behind-the-scenes work of Kaufman’s staff “frees him up to be the facilitator.”

- **Recognize your strengths**

As the facilitator of a forum, it’s important to recognize your strengths. Kaufman admits that he could facilitate a forum every night, but that boredom is his enemy. He works with his staff to provide interesting and compelling topics for the monthly meetings.

- **Frame the forum and your questions**

Framing is important to provoke conversation among the guest speakers and attendees. Kaufman finds it helpful to ask one or two broad framing questions at the beginning of the forum to help his guest speakers put some issues/questions/ideas on the table. He may also frame the issue by providing follow-up questions to stimulate questions and comments from the audience.

He does think that there is a balance between narrowly and broadly framing a topic. When Kaufman had Noam Chomsky as a guest a few years ago, he thinks he framed the forum topic too broadly, focusing too much on international issues and not national issues. For his October 2012 OPEN HOUSE, Representative Kaufman again had Noam Chomsky as a guest. This time he discussed national issues.

- **Actively listen**

Actively listening while moderating is a challenge for most people. However, honing the ability to listen and facilitate at the same time will benefit the discussion and your audience. This skill is especially important when the audience – and sometimes your guests – have moved on from a question, but it wasn't answered.

6. *Working As a Group – The Sheridan, Wyoming delegation Legislative Forum*

Two days, six legislators, and 39 groups or individuals – this describes the annual Legislative Forum in Sheridan, Wyoming. The forum is sponsored by the Sheridan County Chamber of Commerce and gives Sheridan businesses, non-profits, educational institutions, public agencies and individuals an opportunity to meet with their state legislators and discuss important issues.

The December 2012 forum took place downtown at the Sheridan City Hall. It was designed to connect legislators with constituents and local stakeholders before the legislative session began. Legislators learned about issues or concerns of the community, enabling them to make informed decisions while in Cheyenne. Some stakeholders only provided an update about their work, while others used this opportunity to lobby for or against legislation or request state funding. Each presenter had a 15 or 30 minute time slot to talk to the legislators and a volunteer kept time for each presentation. The forum started at 9:00 am and ended around 4:30 pm each day. The room set-up was similar to a traditional committee room, with the legislators sitting at a dais that was crescent-shaped and speakers sat at a table in front of the dais. The forum organizers created an agenda that listed the time of the presentation, the organization presenting, the speaker and the topic. Following the rule of “no surprises,” the agenda explicitly described the presenters, groups and time slots, so the legislators and audience knew what to expect. The forum was broadcast live and was also recorded to enable later broadcasts. At any given time, there were about 10 to 15 citizens in the audience. During some points of the day, the Sheridan high school civics/government class would circulate through to observe the forum. During the lunch hour, the forum went on the road, visiting the Wyoming Girls School one day and the Sheridan Senior Center the other day.

The Sheridan county delegation included Senators Bruce Burns and John Schiffer and Representatives Rosie Berger, Kathy Coleman, Mike Madden and John Patton. Each legislator brought his or her own perspective and expertise to the forum. In addition, they had learned their legislative committee assignments prior to the forum, so they knew what topic areas they would be working on during the session. All these factors enabled the legislators to ask detailed questions of the presenters or provide insight into how the legislature, as a whole, might view or handle the issue during the upcoming session. For example, Representative Rosie Berger, former chair of the House Appropriations Committee and the current Speaker Pro Tempore, was able to talk about the funding challenges for community colleges during Sheridan College's presentation.

A signature design of the forum was that legislators were able to work as a team. Their specific expertise and committee or leadership assignments enabled each of them to address certain issues. Senator Bruce Burns, chair of the Senate Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources committee, provided detailed input when the Sheridan Travel & Tourism group or the Wyoming Department of Fish & Game

presented. Representative John Patton, a member of the Education committee, asked specific questions when education groups presented. This division of work and the comprehensive expertise of the group allowed the other legislators to listen freely without feeling pressure to provide their own complete response to the presenter.

The forum also featured an abundance of open conversation and dialogue among the legislators and presenters. There was no filter from either group. The legislators were curious and honest in their answers and the presenters had an opportunity to share their successes, and sometimes frustrations, in a respectful way.

During the two-day forum, Senator John Schiffer would often say, “paint me a picture,” seeking to know more. Schiffer and the other legislators were interested in learning and understanding intricate details of an issue. The legislators were also adamant about staying on time. After the first or second presenter, Senator Burns requested that presentations be kept to 10 to 12 minutes, so legislators had time to ask questions during the remaining 3 to 5 minutes of the 15-minute time slot. A moderator was present to watch the time of each presentation and played referee between the legislators and presenters when time ran out.

The forum was successful in many ways, especially connecting legislators to stakeholders in a concise format. However, some challenges do exist. While many organizations were able to present information and their viewpoints, only two people met as individuals with the legislators. Also, the forum took place during the day with no evening hours, which limited the number of participants.

Tips:

- **Work as a team**
The key benefit of the Legislative Forum is that legislators work as a team. Each one has his or her own expertise and committee assignment in the legislature. If one legislator couldn't answer a question or provide detailed information, another was surely able to help out.
- **Set an agenda... and stick to it**
The Legislative Forum works well because an agenda is established ahead of time and the legislators are committed to staying on time and on topic.
- **Use a partner**
The forum is organized every year by the Sheridan County Chamber of Commerce. Using a partner eliminates some of the challenges that exist when planning a large scale event.
- **Be genuine and honest**
Legislators at the forum were engaged and interested in the information provided. They were genuine in their conversations, open about what they knew and didn't know and gave honest opinions.