

Engaging with Local Electeds and Agencies

How can I determine which officials or agencies might be able to help me?

You can start by contacting agencies that seem relevant to your project on the surface: the Department of Transportation for a bus shelter project, or Parks & Recreation for a community garden. They'll tell you if you're in the right place, or where to go if you're not. Or you can contact a local elected official's office and ask if they can direct you. Depending on where you live, this could be your city council member, senator, congressperson, community board chairperson, or other representative.

What should I do during my first meeting with an official or agency?

Be really clear about what you want to do, and about what you're asking from them. Are you asking for a permit?

WHO WE SPOKE TO:

David Bragdon

Served as the elected president of the Metro Council in Portland, Oregon for eight years. Now Executive Director of TransitCenter, a civic philanthropy that advocates for improved urban transportation.



For an endorsement? For someone to come out and do an assessment? Also think ahead of time about what you can offer them in return for their support. Will you invite them to attend a ribbon cutting or speak at your event? Will you give them shout-outs in your social media? Identify some specific ways you can be prepared to share the credit.

What are some common mistakes I can avoid?

Threatening or getting angry doesn't usually lead to progress—especially if you're trying to do something constructive. If you want to stop something bad from happening—like keeping a toxic waste dump out of your school zone—it's not inappropriate to be strong and confrontational. But if you're trying to work together to create and build something positive for your neighborhood, it's counterproductive to be combative. No one wants to be told, "You can't do your job right, so I'm going to step in and do it for you." Remember that spirit of cooperation.

Any last thoughts?

You'll learn as you go who can help you with what. Much of it is structural, but some of it is not: it's also about personality. You may find a particular staffer in a mayor's office who takes a personal interest in your project and goes the extra mile to help it succeed. So remember it's not all about what's on paper, it's also about personal relationships. Seize on the best ones you find and cultivate them!

What are some good reasons to reach out to local elected officials and agencies with my neighborhood improvement ideas?

- 1 You might need regulatory permission, for example if your project involves public property
- 2 You might be able to get funding
- 3 You can seek cooperation and endorsements to help bring your project to life—and prevent misunderstandings about your intentions
- 4 You stand to gain some prominence and press, as officials and agencies can command media coverage

David's tools for approaching officials and agencies:

Get in the spirit of cooperation.

No matter who you're talking to, remember that you're trying to get something good done and would like their cooperation to make it happen.

See where your objectives align.

If your project is an after-school healthy cooking class, check to see if your city's Department of Education has set goals for stopping childhood obesity. Emphasize any similarities you find between your goals and theirs.



Connect early.

If an elected official thinks your project will be good for their district, they can help get it off the ground. Lead with the notion that you're trying to make their neighborhood better. (P.S.: Electeds know that what's good for their neighborhood is also good for their own publicity.)

Make it snappy!

Keep your presentations succinct, and don't expect people to read too much. Bring visual aids that can help tell your story quickly and vividly, like photographs, drawings, charts, and graphs.

