Serving our members through advocacy, education and services

Operation: Strong Cities is a multi-faceted effort to mobilize city officials. Cities are the state’s economic engine, first responders, and where most trips begin and end. We must engage, and hold our legislators accountable, in order to uphold a strong partnership between the state and its cities and towns.
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The 2015 Legislature faces some of the greatest challenges in recent memory. The Legislature was held in contempt of court for not making adequate progress towards meeting a Supreme Court mandate to increase investment in basic education. Now they will struggle with how to meet that obligation while the state economy continues its slow growth out of the great recession. Cities know that strong schools are critical to our communities, and that basic investments in infrastructure, transportation and local partnerships are also critical to a strong state. It is our job to convince our own legislators that it is unacceptable to fix one problem without fixing the other.

Use this pocket guide during the legislative session to engage your legislators and impact the way they invest in Washington’s 281 cities.

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It is time to do things differently

We need to continue to make a concerted and assertive effort to make sure every legislator knows that the state is only as strong as its cities and towns - where the majority of our state’s residents live and where front-line services are provided. If we want to see a different result from the Legislature, cities need to forcefully, but respectfully, insist that our legislators respond to our needs.

• Ask for direct commitments from your legislators to help with your issues.
• Inform your city’s residents about what your legislators are doing. It is your responsibility to let them know how their legislators are supporting your community.
• Identify opportunities to hold them accountable for their decisions.
• Celebrate their actions that positively impact your community.
• Work with your local media to illustrate the impact of decisions in Olympia on your community.
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Be strategic when you visit Olympia during session

Personal visits can be critical to moving your priorities as session heats up. See below for some ideas on weeks to highlight.

- Policy bills need to be out of fiscal committees by **February 27**.
- Bills need to pass their original chamber by **March 11**, and then the deadlines start over.
- Late session deadlines include **April 7**, and **April 15** and **26**.

Make your meeting productive

You’ve got the meeting. Now here are some quick thoughts on how to make the most of it.

- Your time will be brief. Legislators schedule appointments in 15 minute windows. They are busy and it’s high stress times during the session, so be prepared to be concise.
- Remember, stories are best illustrated in terms of impacts to constituents, not as impacts on government.
- Most legislators do not have time to read big packets of materials during session. Keep your materials clear and concise. Offer to provide greater detail to staff.
- Don’t try to cover too much, 3-5 issues at most.
- Ask for clear commitments to work on your issues.
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Tell your story through the eyes of your residents

Legislators are focusing on core issues. Talk about your issues in terms of the impacts on your residents, not in terms of how they make running city government more difficult.

- You represent the same constituents as your legislators, so you are a trusted voice on how the impacts of legislative decisions are felt on the ground.

- What will be most compelling to them is how constituents are impacted by what the state does, not how your city government is affected.

- Will something drive costs for your city? How will you pay for it, and what impact will higher taxes or lower services have on your constituents?

- When services will be cut, who uses them and why?

Work to get your local media to cover how your city legislative agenda is faring

Having local media highlight what the Legislature is doing with your priorities is a great way to hold legislators accountable and spur action.

- Choose an issue where the benefit to real people is very clear.

- Explain the role of your local legislators, be honest and clear about who is helping and who you still need help from.

- Consider drafting an opinion editorial and submitting it to your local paper; follow that up with a call to the editor.
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Accept no more excuses

“I’m not on the committee.”
Your legislator’s job is to fight for your district. They need to advocate for your interests with their colleagues who are on the committee.

“I had to follow my caucus.”
The only way for your community to get what you need is for your legislators to fight within their caucus to support you. No one else can fight for your city.

“City funding is not our problem.”
Cities generate 95% of the state’s GDP, 90% of retail sales and $1.3 billion in property taxes for the state school levy. Cities provide critical services from police and fire to drinking water and sewer service. We are the ones implementing the services insisted upon by the state. Cities are both society’s backbone and the state’s economic engine. Investing in funding to do this work is NOT optional.

“This session is all about education funding.”
It is impossible to have a strong school system for our children in a struggling community. The state is making choices that will decide whether our communities come out of the recession with a chance to flourish, or whether we come out floundering.

Ask to set up weekly conference calls with your delegation

Developing a regular weekly phone call is a great way to stay in close contact with your legislators.

- Ask your delegation if they would be willing to have weekly calls with your city, or a group of regional cities.
- Ideally hold calls with all members of your delegation.
- Many cities have weekly breakfast calls; you may need to be flexible on the time.
- Use this time for updates on your city’s legislative and budget priorities.
- Remember to share what you learn with AWC.
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Ask your legislators to discuss your city’s needs with their budget and caucus leadership

Not all legislators are in charge of the budget or in leadership, but each one is responsible for sharing their needs with their leaders. Make sure your issues are on their list.

- Ask your legislators to talk to their leaders about your issues.
- Ask for a report back and any homework assignments you can complete for them.
- Help them frame your issues as stories, and avoid focusing on numbers.
- Ask for a commitment!

Legislators are sponges for useful information. They make decisions on hundreds of issues a year, and do not have time to become personal experts in all of them. Likewise, professional legislative staff must identify and rely on credible sources of information.

- Does your city have good data or particular interest in a policy area? Work to package it up in a way that can be shared.
- Call and offer yourself as a resource to the AWC lobbyist covering that issue, and share your information. You can find a list of the areas AWC lobbyists cover in the back of this guide.
- Is your legislator supportive of one of your priorities? Offer yourself as a resource to help them respond to concerns.
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Make yourself a resource

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March 14-15 is Legislative Town Hall weekend - get involved

Every year the Legislature clears the calendar for one weekend so members can hold local town halls. These are great opportunities to highlight successes or hold legislators accountable to meet local needs.

• Make sure you sign up for your legislator’s newsletter and look out for these announcements.

• You may only have time for one question, so think ahead of time what you want to ask.

• Frame your issues as stories that affect real people, not governments.

• If your legislator has helped you, be sure to publicly thank them.

• Several legislators hold telephone town hall meetings. Let their office know you’re interested in those too.

So what more can you do...

Ask for your legislators’ cell numbers

Your legislators won’t know what you want unless you tell them. And the most direct way to contact them is a quick phone call or text message.

• Reassure them that you will not abuse it.

• Give them your cell phone number as well.

• Ask whether they take text messages.

• Be responsive if they call for feedback.

• Remember to share what you learn with AWC.
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Other quick ideas
Here are some other creative ways to engage your legislators and create accountability.

• After a bill you like passes through committee, thank your legislators who voted to move it on. Ask those that didn’t why not and what it would take for their support.

• Have you let your constituents know how their legislators voted on your priorities in committee?

• Good local news coverage of your needs/priorities? Make sure you email it to your legislators and copy AWC.

• Got some good intel recently? Have you passed it on to AWC?

• Complete a major project, especially with state support? Let your legislators know!

• Did your legislator support your city? Let your newspaper know via op ed or letter to the editor.

• Offer to speak at your business or civic organizations in town to give a legislative update - share how your legislators are doing, good or bad.

• Make sure you gave your legislators your legislative agenda.

AWC Resources:

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Priorities set annually by you - our members. awcnet.org/LegislativeAdvocacy/LegislativePriorities.aspx

Legislative Bulletin
Our weekly publication during the legislative session. awcnet.org/LegislativeAdvocacy/LegislativeIssues.aspx

Operation: Strong Cities
A multi-faceted effort to mobilize city officials. awcnet.org/OperationStrongCities.aspx

Bill Tracker
An easy-to-use tool to track bills impacting cities. awcnet.org/LegislativeAdvocacy/BillTracker.aspx

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