California Special Districts Association
Districts Stronger Together

Grassroots Advocacy Guide

A GUIDE TO BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE FOR SPECIAL DISTRICTS.
Effective Advocacy

The perception of special districts in the court of public opinion and particularly in the halls of the State Capitol affect the everyday operation of all special districts and the services provided to constituents. This guide provides special districts with an overview on public outreach, insights into the legislative process, ideas on how to advocate on behalf of your district and what your district can do to share in CSDA’s efforts.

Whether engaging in a local public information campaign or influencing significant statewide policy, there is an important role for each of California’s independent special districts and their board members to play in order to impact public policy both at home and in Sacramento.

Grassroots advocacy is critical to the mission of any agency but it doesn’t have to be difficult. This guide and other resources provided by CSDA will allow your district to better deliver its message and ultimately its core services.
Table of Contents

Public Outreach  page 4
  What are your goals?  page 6
  Who is your audience?  page 6
  What is your message?  page 6
  How do you get your message out?  page 7
  The bottom line  page 8
  Inverted pyramid  page 9

Legislative Outreach  page 10
  The legislative process  page 12
  Understanding the Capitol landscape  page 13
  Your voice in the Capitol  page 13
  Sample letter  page 16
  How to stay connected with CSDA’s advocacy efforts  page 18
Public Outreach

Keeping the public informed about what you do and asking them for guidance on how you’re doing is a fundamental responsibility for any public agency. They are the boss, after all, and all of us understand from personal experience that our jobs are a lot easier and a lot less stressful when the boss knows about and approves of what you’re doing.

It doesn’t have to be expensive or labor intensive, but it needs to be well thought-out and focused on answering four basic questions:

• What are your goals?
• Who is your audience?
• What is your message?
• How do you get your message out?

It is fundamentally important that the goal of any public awareness program be specific and measureable.
What are your goals?
It is fundamentally important that the goal of any public awareness program be specific and measurable. If the goal is to reduce water use by 20 percent, for example, make that clear. Tracking water use is measurable. Without a measurable goal, it’s impossible to determine the effectiveness of your efforts. You can’t save money by pulling back when you’ve reached your goal, and just as importantly, you can’t change course if you see you’re missing your mark.

Sometimes your goal isn’t to change behavior, but to increase public awareness of the district and its programs. Even here, your goal has to be specific and measurable. Are more people using the district’s website? Are more people calling or attending board meetings?

Who is your audience?
Effective public awareness campaigns have to be structured like a conversation, not a lecture. That means talking to a person, not a crowd. So, when you think about who you’re talking to, it’s important to realize you’re not talking to “The Public.” You’re trying to have a conversation with real people who are the target market for your campaign. Maybe you’re talking to community residents about rate issues. Maybe you’re talking to homeowners about watering lawns.

The point is, your efforts aren’t directed at a faceless “Public,” but at identifiable people and communities.

What is your message?
The basic messages of the campaign should be clear and concise, without any “insider” jargon or acronyms. They should also feature a specific “Call to Action” of some kind (Turn off your tap! Use mosquito repellant, etc.) that advances the goal of your campaign.

Your messages should also be about your target audience—not about you. Suggesting that some course of action “will be good for the district” or “will save the district money” doesn’t mean anything to your target audience. Messages always need to be expressed in terms of how an action will help people, residents, families, etc.

Knowing your audience
For a good illustration, go to www.crpd.org, the website for the Conejo Recreation and Park District. Their website and outreach programs are targeted at specific audiences, reflecting the different users of their recreation classes and facilities.
Driving people there doesn’t have to be difficult. The address for your website should be prominently featured on all district news releases and correspondence. The website doesn’t need complicated graphics (see www.google.com, for example), but it does need to be user-friendly and updated regularly.

It should also work hand-in-glove with your media relations and community relations efforts. All your news releases and publications should be available for download on your website. All of your community relations materials should include your web address.

**Drive People to Your Website**

The best way to carry on a conversation with your target audience is to get people to use your website. If your district doesn’t have one, get one. There’s no better way to have clear, direct, two-way communication with constituents than through your website.

Attracting web traffic

A good illustration of this is the “Fight the Bite” website maintained by the Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District (www.fightthebite.net). The district heavily promotes its website through advertising and news media in an effort to keep the public informed about pest-borne diseases and the efforts needed to keep them in check. Their “Call to Action” effectively makes it clear that the entire community—not just employees of the district—need to work together to help control illnesses like West Nile virus.
Social media, like Twitter and Facebook, have a place too. For one thing, their technology allows you to “push” messages and information out to users when you have something urgent or newsworthy to say. For another, it carries the concept of a “conversation” one step further, because both actively encourage the kind of two-way conversation needed to get your points across.

Anyone with access to your website can sign up for Twitter and Facebook updates. Whenever you send out a news release, send out a “tweet” or put it on your Facebook page. You can also be more informal when using social media. Consider posting pictures from district activities, or progress reports for ongoing projects, i.e. anything that advances the idea that you’re having a conversation with your audience.

And Speaking of News Releases…
Social media services like Facebook and Twitter haven’t replaced news releases and other traditional forms of reaching out to the media; they’ve just enhanced it and created another channel for getting them into the hands of reporters and the public.

An effective news release has three basic qualities:
1. It follows the “inverted pyramid” format, meaning the lead sentence should contain the most important information in the release.
2. It answers the traditional questions of “who, what, when, where, why and how.”
3. It is newsworthy. Numbers and facts aren’t newsworthy. Compelling stories about how those numbers and facts affect real people and real communities are.

For example, the news illustrates farm stories by reporting from a farm or stories about water from a stream or a treatment plant. If you invite the media to an event or a news conference to cover your story, it’s important to pay attention to the picture you’re presenting. “Talking heads” speaking in an office or an auditorium don’t illustrate or reinforce your message, so always keep the picture in mind.

The Bottom Line
A public awareness program doesn’t have to be expensive, but it does have to be well thought out and directed. Make sure your messages are relevant to your target audience, your “Call to Action” is clear and concise and the effects of your efforts can be measured.
Lead – Summarize entire story in 1 or 2 sentences with most important information first

Quote from spokesperson you would like to see in the news

Background information and key facts, making sure to provide the reader with the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of your story

2nd quote from spokesperson

Standard paragraph about your organization, where it is, what it does, and who it serves
Legislative Outreach

Since the California Legislature, governor, and state agencies create and execute public policy, it is crucial to understand how California’s policymaking occurs and how you can affect that process. You don’t need to be an expert, but your input on the local impact of statewide policy helps elected officials recognize which policies work and which could have adverse consequences.

You can make a significant difference through your efforts. Legislators always find time to listen to the voters they represent locally. Special districts not only deliver services to constituents in legislators’ districts, they are constituents! By cultivating relationships and becoming a valuable resource, district leaders, managers and employees can ensure the district’s perspective on issues is understood and that legislators have the information they need.
THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Idea

Bill is introduced

Policy Committee

Fiscal Committee

Floor Vote

Concurrence Floor Vote

Bill Goes to Governor

Most bills become a law January 1 of the next year.

Urgency bills take effect immediately.

If passed with amendments

Floor Vote

If original house concurs

If signed

Vetoed

If passed without amendments

If passed (Sent to other house)

Bills with $

Bills with $
Understanding the Capitol Landscape

Legislative Staff
Policymakers vote on complicated legislation in high volumes, and they rarely have time to read every section of every bill. State legislators must cast votes on over two thousand bills each year. Therefore, they depend upon legislative aides to provide information on how specific pieces of legislation will affect their constituents.

Legislative aides are key support staff for legislators and important gatekeepers who can facilitate your relationship with your elected representative. Some aides also have considerable influence on policy issues and help to form the legislator’s positions. Regardless of how much policy influence a particular aide has, it will benefit you to establish a strong working relationship with your legislator’s staff.

Committee Staff and Members
Due to the overwhelming workload that lawmakers are confronted with, most of the discussion and decision-making is accomplished by legislative committees and their staff. Committees are where CSDA seeks to share information, facts, data, anecdotes and opinions from local practitioners who are experts in core service delivery. This can be an essential place for your participation. Legislative committees are charged with analyzing the technical policy impacts of every bill and will often incorporate pertinent background from local agencies into their analyses when made available.

Daily File
This document, published daily by the State Senate and Assembly, lists bills eligible for floor action and also includes a schedule of committee hearings. The Daily File is an excellent tool for determining the time and location of committee hearings as well as the hearing date of a particular bill of interest. It is the Legislature’s version of the agenda that special districts must post before a board meeting. The Daily File can be found and downloaded at leginfo.ca.gov/dayfile.html.

Your Voice in the Capitol

Importance of Communicating with Your Legislators
As a district, the most important thing that board members and staff can do is to work with and get to know the Senators and Assembly Members who represent your area. Educate them about the services you provide and talk about ways you can work with the Legislature to improve those services. CSDA advocates on behalf of all types of special districts. However, legislators appreciate hearing directly from their constituents—that’s you! Before legislators vote on a bill, they take into consideration who is in support and opposition to the measure, what are its anticipated costs, and most importantly, how it affects their legislative district.
Respond to CSDA “Calls to Action”

“Calls to Action” are a key component to CSDA’s success in lobbying the most significant bills impacting all types of special districts. CSDA will issue these requests to its membership via eNews, Legislative Alerts, and the CSDA website. Combined efforts between CSDA’s legislative advocates and special district leaders can significantly alter the outcome of decisions made in the Capitol. There are a number of ways you can respond to a Call to Action, including:

- Phoning your legislator.
- Writing a support/opposition letter on behalf of your district.
- Meeting with your legislator in person.

Phone Your Legislator

Initial contact with your legislator’s office will usually begin with a phone call to discuss a particular issue. Lawmakers take notice when constituents make the effort to call and convey their views on the issues important to them. Being prepared and utilizing talking points to further your district’s stance is always beneficial.

DO’S AND DON’T’S

Calling on your legislator

- Make sure to identify yourself as a constituent, and provide your name, title, and name of the district you represent.
- Briefly identify the service(s) your district provides and the number of residents, as well as the region/communities, your district serves.
- Identify the specific issue or bill number you are interested in discussing.
- Ask to speak with the legislative staff member who covers the issue of interest.
- Inquire regarding the legislator’s stance or position on the issue.
- Do not be afraid to share your district’s position or to respectfully request that the legislator take a particular action.
- If speaking to staff, ask that your message be relayed to the legislator.
- Provide your contact information should the staff member or legislator wish to follow up on the issue or any other issue in the future.

Write a Support/Opposition Letter on a Bill of Interest

Letter writing is an easy and effective way to encourage legislators to support your position. Lawmakers and their staff pay attention to their mail, so make sure to give careful thought to your letter. You can write to a legislator to voice your support or opposition to a piece of legislation or particular policy issue, provide information regarding a problem in your community, share your experiences or knowledge with them, or even to show gratitude for their vote on a specific bill.

Every bill is assigned to a policy committee in the Legislature. These committees analyze and list organizations in support and opposition of each bill. Furthermore, the minority party’s caucus writes its own separate analysis from the policy committee.
Grassroots Advocacy Guide

Analysis. Oftentimes, legislators base their vote largely off of these analyses. Therefore, submitting a copy of your letter to the legislative policy committees and minority party caucuses makes a big impact.

Meeting with Your Legislator
As long-time CSDA legislative advocate Ralph Heim would say, “When you put in a call to a legislator, do they return your phone call?” CSDA recommends that special districts meet with their Senator(s) and Assembly Member(s) at least once per year in each legislator’s district office as well as annually at CSDA’s Special Districts Legislative Days in Sacramento.

The more legislators know about the districts they represent, the more educated they will be on state legislation that affects all special districts. CSDA annually sends each state Senator and Assembly Member a welcome packet with a list of all the special districts in his or her legislative district. However, putting a face to the name and having a meaningful relationship with your representative is invaluable.

A meeting can be scheduled at a legislator’s Capitol office or local district office. You can also invite them to your facility or an event your district is hosting. Simply contact your legislator’s office and ask who his or her scheduler is. Then send the scheduler a written “request for meeting” that concisely includes “who, what, when, where and why.” Such requests are common protocol and helpful to schedulers. Legislators receive hundreds of meeting requests each month, so you may need to follow up on your meeting request. Be positive, but more importantly, be polite and understanding.

DO’S AND DON’TS

**Keys to successful letters**

- Write on your agency letterhead if possible.
- Identify the region/communities your district serves.
- Be brief but thoughtful.
- Explain how the issue affects your agency, the constituents you and the legislator jointly serve and why you support/oppose it.
- When possible, include anecdotes, facts, statistics, examples, and cost estimates from your district.
- Ask for the legislator’s support or opposition.
- Be reasonable and tactful in your correspondence. Don’t ask for the impossible. Don’t threaten.
- Provide CSDA a copy of your letter and a copy of the response you receive from your legislator so we also know what issues are important to you and can track and coordinate grassroots efforts.
- Send the appropriate policy committee hearing the bill a copy of your letter so that your agency’s position will be listed in its analysis (usually at least a week before the scheduled hearing of the bill, although this varies slightly by committee).
- Send the minority party’s caucus a copy of your letter so that your agency will be listed in the caucus analysis.
Sample Letter

(Date)

The Honorable [Your Legislator’s Name]
California State Senate/Assembly
State Capitol
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Senate/Assembly Bill XXX (Author’s Last Name) – SUPPORT/OPPOSE

Dear Senator/Assembly Member [Your Legislator’s Last Name]:

On behalf of the Board of Directors of [Name of your district], I am writing to support/respectfully oppose Senate/Assembly Bill XXX by [Author’s name]. [Include a brief description of your district].

[Give brief but thoughtful explanation of your position. Try to keep to one page.]

[Be sure to explain how the proposed legislation will help or hurt your community and the constituents you share with the legislator.]

For these reasons, the [Name of your District] supports/respectfully opposes AB/SB XXX.

Sincerely,

[Your name, Title]
[Name of your district]

cc: [Author of Bill]
[Committee Chair and Members]
[Committee Consultant]
[Minority Party’s Caucus Consultant]
California Special Districts Association

Your Action Can Make All the Difference

As part of a “Call to Action,” CSDA may request the special district community to submit letters of support/opposition regarding a particular bill. Letter writing campaigns often play a pivotal role in advocating on behalf of special districts. For example, CSDA successfully worked on an effort in 2010 to stop AB 155, a bill that would have created unnecessary obstacles for local agencies in need of Chapter 9 bankruptcy protections. The efforts of individual special districts that sent letters and made calls to their legislators helped prevent this bill from reaching the governor’s desk.
Ways to Cultivate Relationships with Your Legislators

Once you have met with your legislators it will be important to continue to cultivate a relationship with them. Some ideas are:

- Offer to be a resource, and be responsive to their requests for information and help.
- Add legislators and their staff to district mailing and press release lists to receive your newsletter and other public information materials.
- Make phone calls to touch base.
- Send press clips and other pieces of information you think they may find interesting, along with a short personal hand-written note.
- Toot your district’s horn when you receive an award, positive media coverage or public acknowledgement.
- Provide a district tour to each of your legislators and their staff.

Awareness of the Legislative Calendar

During the legislative session, lawmakers work in the Capitol Monday-Thursday and in their districts on Fridays. During summer recess and fall interim recess, legislators primarily work out of their district offices. For a copy of the legislative calendar, go to www.legislature.ca.gov and click on “Calendar and Schedules.”

How do I find out who my state legislators are?

Your district’s service area is represented by at least one State Senator and one State Assembly Member. You can find your legislators by going to www.legislature.ca.gov, clicking on “Districts,” and entering your address.
How to stay connected with CSDA’s Advocacy Efforts

There are several ways that members can stay informed on the key issues being discussed in the Capitol by partnering with CSDA.

CSDA Legislative Committee

The Legislative Committee plays a central role in establishing priorities and positions on legislation introduced each legislative session. Any CSDA member or business affiliate may apply to serve on the committee. CSDA annually sends a Committee and Volunteer Interest Form to all members, and ratification of committee membership takes place at the CSDA Board planning session.

Expert Feedback Teams

Expert Feedback Teams provide invaluable expertise to CSDA. The teams are comprised of district staff, management, directors and business affiliates who work within specified disciplines. When a need for feedback arises on a particular policy matter, CSDA will send an email to the pertinent expert feedback team asking for input. Team members need only reply with their thoughts, opinions and experiences. Sign up by sending your name, title, district name, phone number, issue expertise (For example: budget/finance, environmental, public contracting, etc.) and a short description of your qualifications to CSDA.

DO’S AND DON’T’S

When meeting with your legislator

• Know your legislator. Look on his or her website and do some research. Where is he or she from? What was his or her past profession? What are his or her main policy interests and what committees does he or she sit on?
• Be thoroughly prepared. Talking points, district fact sheets, copies of position letters, relevant research, analyses and more can be used in an information kit.
• Stay focused on your issue, but share relevant personal experiences as much as possible.
• Present positions clearly and concisely. Most meetings in the Capitol office last about 15-30 minutes. District office meetings may be granted more time when available.
• Offer to be a resource. As a special purpose district, you are the local expert in your field. This is a significant value to a legislator who must vote on a myriad of issues.
• Leave a business card. Legislators and their staff meet with thousands of people throughout the year. Anything you can do to make it easier to identify you is helpful—even if you have met before.
• Do not take your discussions personally. Never argue or threaten your elected official. Be understanding that your position may differ from your legislator.
• Write a thank you note following the meeting.
Your Tools
In addition to the many ways you can be involved with CSDA’s advocacy efforts, CSDA offers a variety of tools to keep you up-to-date and assist your district.

- **eNews and Legislative Alerts**
  CSDA’s electronic newsletter detailing the most important public policy issues affecting special districts. Legislative alerts notify members of urgent legislative threats and opportunities.

- **CSDA Website (csda.net)**
  CSDA’s website contains many useful resources for your district, including bill reports, assistance to set up a meeting with your legislator, helpful guides and more!

- **Social Media**
  Stay connected to the special district community. Follow “specialdistrict” on Twitter and “like” California Special Districts Association on Facebook.

Share your Stories
CSDA enjoys hearing stories about your interactions and the relationships you have built with your legislators. Your experiences regarding advocacy efforts not only assist CSDA in our representation of special districts, but they can also serve as an example to districts throughout the state. Please contact CSDA to share your story!

Mission Statement
The California Special Districts Association provides legislative advocacy, education and member service for all special districts.

Special Districts Legislative Days
A simple way to begin or build upon relationships with your legislators is to attend CSDA’s Special Districts Legislative Days in Sacramento. This annual legislative conference affords you the opportunity to tell your legislators about the critical services your district provides, significant projects your district is working on, and your district’s involvement in its local community. Meetings with your legislators are scheduled for you and participating will allow you to become accustomed to interacting with your representatives.