Growing the Influence of the Florida Native Plant Society: How to Become an Advocate for Good Environmental Policy

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Realities of Lawmaking in Florida

• Legislators do not write, and in fact do not read, most bills
• Lobbyists write bills, amendments and “talking points” on bills
• Staff writes the State Budget
• Most Committee and Floor proceedings are choreographed
• The Minority Party rarely gets its bills heard
• Only Members in Leadership or ascending get bills passed
• A handful of corporations control the majority of policies
How Then, Do We Speak for Florida’s Ecosystems?

Professional Lobbying
Citizen Lobbying
Social Media
Public Relations
Lobbying

Lobbying is simply:
“communicating with officials to encourage the adoption, defeat or modification of a law or policy at the state or local level.”

It means relating your views and information to decision-makers in order to influence them toward the action you want, and diplomatically challenging the arguments of those who hold an opposing view.
Lobbying by 501(c)3 is limited by IRS rules

• FNPS could not qualify for 501(c)(3) status if lobbying was a substantial part of our work;

• *Lobbying* includes any paid effort to affect acts by Congress, a state legislature, local council, or similar governing body with respect to acts, bills, resolutions, ballot initiatives or constitutional amendments; **it does not include actions by executive, judicial, or administrative bodies (e.g., Governor, DEP, FWC).**

• An organization is attempting to influence legislation if it contacts, or urges the public to contact, members or employees of a legislative body for the purpose of proposing, supporting, or opposing legislation.

• 501(c)3 with less than $.5 million annual budget must spend less than 20% on lobbying.
Professional Lobbying

Professional advocates know and care about the issue, have good relationships with staff and Legislators, and or have gained entrée via political campaign contributions.

In any circumstance, the lobbyist combines an understanding of the political backdrop, current events affecting power, the intricate process of lawmaking, and where the issue stacks up, to best position their clients’ bill or budget item for success.
An act relating to environmental resources; amending s. 259.032, F.S.; requiring the Department of Environmental Protection to publish, update, and maintain a database of conservation lands; requiring the department to submit a report by a certain date each year to the Governor and the Legislature identifying the percentage of such lands which the public has access to and the efforts the department has undertaken to increase public access; amending s. 373.019, F.S.; revising the definition of the term “water resource development” to include technical
Citizen lobbying of decision makers is one of the most effective ways to influence public policy. Any citizen can and should lobby on proposals and policies of question, concern and interest. No one should assume that “someone else will take care of it.” Citizens, especially subject area experts like FNPS Members, can provide valuable information and points of view decision makers need in order to better understand an issue.

Also, constituents’ positions on issues carry significant weight, especially in the district.
How Do I Lobby?

To lobby as a citizen, you should call or visit your district State Representative and Senator. Find who they are at www.flsenate.gov/Senators/Find and www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/myrepresentative.aspx

You can also write letters or e-mails, and you can testify at public hearings.

An easy way to lobby is to take part in the FNPS Action Alert system. We provide background on bills and budget items, sample language or talking points, and contact info for key legislators. Please click here to sign up for our alert system:

http://www.fnps.org/news/alerts
Both the House and Senate websites allow you to easily identify the legislators serving in each district. The Senate site includes an interactive map.
Both sites also allow you to register for a username and then track the progress of bills of your choosing as they proceed through the legislative process.
Citizens can best lobby Legislators in the district.

One of the advantages we have as the Florida Native Plant Society is to lure lawmakers to our natural habitats!
Tell Our Lawmakers that Florida’s Land and Water Conservation Needs Extend Beyond the Everglades

February 04, 2016

The Florida House and Senate have again proposed an annual budget that fails to provide adequate funding for the state’s land conservation programs. The Senate proposes to provide only $10 million for the Florida Forever land acquisition program, while the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) estimates that the state needs to spend between $100 million and $150 million annually to meet its conservation goals. The decision to cut funding further undermines the state’s land conservation programs, which are critical to maintaining biodiversity, protecting water quality, and ensuring that the state’s natural resources are preserved for future generations. The Florida Native Plant Society is urging our elected officials to prioritize funding for land conservation programs to ensure that Florida’s natural resources are protected for years to come.
What to Say

From our Action Alert screen, you will be informed of the issue. You should:

• Explain what bill/issue/policy you are communicating about

• Clearly state what action you want the Legislator/official to take, such as “Vote YES on SB 918” or “Increase Florida Forever funding to $300 million”

• Explain why. This is where your interest and passion for native Florida comes in. Tell your story, and express how the matter impacts you, your family and Florida as a whole.
Go See your Legislator in the District

• The single most effective means of influencing a lawmaker is to make an appointment and go speak with them at their district office.

• Remember, you are *their* voter— they need you as a constituent, so your positions on issues do carry significant weight.

• Always be respectful, maintain a professional appearance, have one clear message and “ask”.

• Leave them and their staff with a written copy of your message and “ask”. Make it easy for staff to contact you for more information.

• Send a note or email message to legislator and staff thanking them for their time.
Attend a Legislative Delegation Meeting

• All counties are members of delegations, and will meet at least once per year in your district.
• Both Representatives and Senators from your district will be there.
• It is best to request a spot on the Agenda in advance.
• You can also sign up to speak once you arrive.
• It is a great way to get all of your state elected officials in one room, focused on what you have to show and tell!
At Delegation Meetings, any member of the public can speak and can present materials, and sometimes can even make a presentation.

These are great for getting not just your lawmakers’ notice, but also your neighbors’.
Attend Election Year Events

Candidates Will Always Appear At:
• Fundraisers
• Structured Debates
• Ribbon Cuttings/Ground-breaking/Store Openings
• Tiger Bay Forums
• Parades
• Meet-the-Candidate Forums
Testify at a Public Meeting

• Generally, testimony on legislation is heard by one of the standing committees. Committees have assigned hearing rooms and meeting days, which are noticed at least 2 days in advance. Committees usually hear several bills during a typical meeting.

• Bills are not necessarily heard in numerical order. The various committees may have different rules for testifying, including time limits. It is advisable to be prepared to present your testimony in three to five minutes.
Public Testimony Tips

• Prepare your testimony in writing and bring copies for legislators and committee and legislative staff

• Legislators may offer amendments when the bill is presented, which may change the way you feel about the bill and, thus, affect your testimony

• Limit your testimony and try not to repeat testimony offered by previous speakers

• Always act respectfully and with decorum
Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter

- Instagram
  Share your pictures of native plants, especially rare ones.

- Hashtags
  - #FNPS #Florida #NativePlants

- Pinterest
  - If you use it display native Florida plant, garden or flowers.

- Twitter
  - It’s more for breaking news and news aggregating. Facebook and Instagram are both cannibalizing their market share.
• Share! Share! Share!

• Talk about native plants in your region and how they affect your community.

• Tag your state representative and state senator (Be Polite!). Be an informed citizen and not a voice of the organization.
Blogs

- Talk about native plants on various blogs.


- Spreading the message to a wide and varying audience is extremely important.
Letter Writing and Emailing

- Keep all letters/e-mail to one page. You can enclose and attach additional information.
- State the bill number and/or issue you are writing about with a brief discussion of what it does.
- Explain why you want lawmakers to vote a certain way. Provide facts, statistics, personal stories and experiences to support your point of view.
- Restate what action you want and thank the legislator for her/his consideration of your position, and ask what his/her position is on the matter.
Letters to the Editor

• Provides an ideal way to educate readers on an issue and make sure your lawmaker knows the point of view in the hometown paper

• Find a local hook for your letter that brings the issue home to the reader, such as the case to protect one of the rarest flowers in the world, the Brooksville Bellflower, by continuing to preserve lands in Hillsborough, Pasco and Hernando counties.

• Use facts, and be concise and approachable

Send electronic copies of your letter to your district legislators and post them on social media.
Advantages
• Allows you to take immediate, quick action to respond to a bill coming up for a vote
• Multiple calls creates an impression of strength in numbers and can yield greater influence
• Simple ask, “Vote YES on SB 918”
• Ask to speak with an LA so your call doesn’t get taken by an intern
• Identify yourself by town so they know you’re a constituent

Disadvantages
• If you identify yourself as a member of an organization, all your collective calls will be treated as ONE CALL
• Faxes, letters, and phone calls are treated about equally
• You usually get an intern, and they literally keep a score sheet with the tally of YES and NO votes
Public Relations

• The best way to get a legislator’s attention is to be a friend. It is especially helpful if you contact your legislator from time-to-time with a good word or some update on your business or personal ventures, rather than just contacting your legislator when you have troubles.

• Say thank you. If the legislator really makes a special effort on your behalf, try to recognize that by attending a campaign fundraiser, writing a letter to the local newspaper editor praising the legislator for his or her good work, sending a thank you note, or giving a legislator appropriate recognition before a group.
The single best way to make yourself valued and remembered by a lawmaker is to contribute to his or her campaign. That could be time, connections or money. Or all three. Walk the campaign trail on your legislator’s behalf and attend their speaking engagements.
Find a way to support the candidate in whatever you can, even if not at the ballot box.

Walking local neighborhoods with the candidate/incumbent is a great way to get meaningful face time with him/her. You relate on a personal level, find common ground, and the lawmaker remembers you after the election.
Contribute!

• Any bit of time, effort, or money you contribute to advocating goes a long way.

• Making your voice heard can make a huge difference in the outcome of local and state policy and funding.

• You’re not a Fortune 500 company, but you can communicate with Legislators when they’re running for office, and once they are in a position to vote the right way.
Summary of Options for Engagement

1. Face-to-face interaction with your legislator/commissioner
   1. Nothing beats a constituent meeting an official in their own office.
   2. A delegation/town hall meeting can provide “strength in numbers”.

2. Phone call, letter or personal email
   1. An essential option when rapid action/response is necessary.
   2. Less intimidating & less prep required than face-to-face meeting.

3. Participation in mass email
   1. Quickest and easiest option
   2. Greatly reduced influence; mass action often counted as one contact.
Speaking for the conservation of Florida is essential, and should be done at every opportunity.

When you speak for Florida, be gentle and certain.

She is grateful for you.