

# IFAS Leadership Development: Choices for Political Action at the Local Level<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This article is part of the series *IFAS Leadership Development*, with eleven modules developed for use by Florida Cooperative Extension agents. They are designed for training agents and officers. Information and activities provided in this series will help Extension leaders in facilitating leadership development for their agents and officers. Handouts for audience use are labeled in the leadership development modules. These may be duplicated for use during training sessions. Each lesson is designed for a workshop approximately two hours long. Various parts of the modules can be shortened or expanded according to the needs of participants and availability of time.

## Recommendations for Leader Training

Prepare to teach this lesson by reading and familiarizing yourself with the objectives, materials, handouts and activities/exercises.

- Begin preparation several days in advance in order to secure whatever additional resources you need to make the lesson a "local" learning experience.
- Plan a learning environment with care so that the surroundings contribute to the achievement of the objectives.
- Begin on time, and end on time. Schedule a break at about halfway through the lesson.
- With each lesson after the first one, ask participants what they did as a result of the previous lesson. Record these!
- Introduce each lesson with an overview of how it fits into the overall major leadership development program.
- End each lesson with a summary and restatement of objectives. Explain what the participants are expected to do with the lesson after they leave.
- Heighten anticipation for the next lesson by sharing a brief description of it, but be cautious not to give too much away.

## Objective

To learn different ways to get involved in decision-making processes that affect the community.

## Lesson Outline

Introduction and Overview of Objectives (15 minutes)

- *How to Find Your Way Through City Hall*

Group Lectures and Discussion (45 minutes)

- *Choices for Political Action at the Local Level* (handout)
- *Choices for Political Action* (overhead)
- *Background Material for Lecture*

Break (5 minutes)

Group Exercise (40 minutes)

- *Story Problems*

Summary and Evaluation (15 minutes)

**Total time: 2 hours**

## Lesson Plan—Choices for Political Action at the Local Level

### Step 1—15 minutes

Introduce this lesson with a brief presentation from *How to Find Your Way Through City Hall*.

Emphasize

1. there are a number of approaches for getting involved in political action at the local level.
2. each approach has consequences.

Tell what the objective of the lesson is.

## Step 2—45 minutes

Distribute *Choices for Political Action at the Local Level* to participants.

Use *Choices for Political Action* for overhead.

Use *Background Material* for lecture. Allow for a discussion after each step. Use local examples or agencies where possible. Call for examples from the audience.

## Step 3—40 minutes

Form small groups of five people.

Hand each group one *story problem* found at the end of lecture material. Use local problems if possible with a different one for each group. These may be clipped from the newspapers. Be sure to present different views as shown in the examples.

Ask each group to state what choice they would make for getting involved in local political action.

Allow about 15 minutes for the group to work together. Ask each group to report to the large group. Discuss each response.

## Step 4—15 minutes

Use the *Summary* remarks as part of closing comments. Briefly summarize what was done during the lesson and the purpose of the lesson.

Hand out evaluation.

Solicit comments and suggestions.

Take up evaluations and adjourn on time.

## How to Find Your Way Through City Hall

*The secret to walking on water is knowing where the stones are.*

This paper is meant to be an introduction to local political action. It is an outline of the variety of choices available to citizens who want to participate in the decision-making of their community.

Entering the political arena is often accidental for many who become involved because they are interested in a particular issue. Since they are inexperienced, they succeed in a trial and error fashion.

By explaining "why you go where" in local government, contrasting the different levels, and describing what one reasonably can expect from each one, the paper can be a

start in making the system more understandable to the novice. By identifying some consequences of these action choices, it can also be a tool for citizens groups in making a decision in intervening in the policy-making process in the way that is best suited to their purpose. Although the numbering sequence follows the flow of an issue through all potential channels, it is important to note that it is possible for citizens to select any approach at any time.

The guidelines are neither foolproof nor the only way to identify the most appropriate channels, strategies, or approaches. They can be useful in finding out what works for you. The most important thing is to develop your own style.

The abstract *Choices for Political Action at the Local Level* is a summary of the paper that can be used as an outline for a presentation on the subject.

Prepared by Inge C. McNeese, FCL Editor, Oregon State University, for FCL Regional Training Institute, 1982.

## Choices for Political Action at the Local Level

1. **Staff** (administrative support to executive branch of government, e.g., agency personnel, committee staff, etc.): A source of information, advice, and opinion. They can make small decisions within the scope of their procedures. As a rule, they have no authority for short term policy changes.
2. **Elected Officials:** A source of information, advocates for policy changes, intermediaries for citizen groups, or citizens and staff. The district representation or ward systems in smaller jurisdictions enhance accountability, responsiveness, and accessibility.
3. **Committee** (standing, ad hoc, citizens, or subcommittees): Typically, an advisory level of government. Recommendations for higher levels of government are prepared. This is where the work leading up to a decision is conducted. They are characterized by greater informality, more candid and detailed staff reviews, airing of positions of all interested parties, and brokering or negotiating of trade-offs between interest blocks.
4. **Councils/Boards/Commissions:** The final action; decision-making levels for cities, counties, districts, and planning bodies. Frequently decisions are ratifications of committee recommendations. They are characterized by more formal procedures and presentations. The likelihood of action without prior committee recommendation or referral is remote. It is the least likely arena for compromise or conflict resolution. It is the most public area of policymaking process; therefore the PR value of confrontation is the greatest.

5. **Voters:** Ones who have direct access to legislative power through the initiative or referendum process. It applies to legislative action only (contrast administrative or quasi-judicial) in state, home-rule county, or city with appropriate charter provisions. It can either propose grass roots legislation or challenge a decision by policymakers in referring their action to popular vote.
6. **Media:** Relevant to any discussion of the political process, although it is not a bona fide category of political action. Social media, letters to the editor, feature stories, podcasts or radio talk shows on current events, and editorial board support are desirable, no-cost strategies for influencing public officials and contributing to the public debate.

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## Background Material for Lecture

### Staff Level

#### Information

The first step to learn is to determine who has the authority or responsibility for the subject you are interested in. You have to find the appropriate agency, department, division, section, and then the right person within it. Patience, lots of telephoning and persistent questions will pay off. You are hoping to identify not just a knowledgeable person, but also one that is congenial and helpful. When you do find helpful people on the staff, solicit their assistance, cultivate them. Use every opportunity to personalize the problem. They can be a source of information for you in the future.

It may take more than one visit to develop a relationship and to gain their confidence. Be patient and continue to build on knowledge and rapport.

Don't be afraid to appear ignorant. You **are**, at this point. It is the very reason for your research.

Ask questions of fact, on policy, on historical background, political climate, staff judgment, projections on cost, or timing; ask about attitudes and precedents. Remember to converse in a chatty, social style. You are not the Grand Inquisitor.

This is the stage where no question is too small or too inconsequential to be asked. Unexpected dimensions of a subject reveal themselves often by accident.

Double check on information with several staff members.

Depending on the situation, you may need to exercise discretion in revealing your sources. Ideally, staff should be able to be open about information and in many cases, it

is both appropriate and necessary to identify them. Be aware of the possibility that you may need to protect your sources in sensitive cases.

#### Documentation

If you know precisely what you are looking for, ask for copies of pages or entire documents. Don't waste your time reading extraneous, irrelevant reports though. In the event you don't know where to find the material, ask general background questions. Explain what you need. More than likely, the staff knows where to find it and will help if you give them a chance.

Most public documents are covered by the open records law, which guarantees your access. If you have to rely on it as a threat, however, you have already lost the game of finding a helpful source. User fees are becoming more popular with agencies who are looking for additional revenues to offset their costs. As long as the fees are relative in scale to cost recovery, you cannot object. If they are so high that they are a disincentive, you may want to make it your first priority to change that policy.

#### Action

For staff level decisions find out whether the person you are dealing with has power to act before you explain many details or try to list arguments supporting your case. You can save yourself much time and frustration if you wait until you get to the right person. You may have to move up in the bureaucratic hierarchy until you find the person with authority to act. If you are not sure, start at the top. Remember the squeaky wheel rule. It works.

In theory, staff falls into the category of the executive branch of government. Under a strict interpretation this means that staff carries out policy but does not formulate it. However, in practice the lines are not as clearly drawn between making policy and implementing it.

Staff may be unable to change policy in a short period, but in most cases they are proposers and strong proponents of policy. Their role as advocates in public policy decision-making should not be overlooked.

### Elected Officials

#### Access

Get to know them individually. Establish your credibility.

But, don't overwhelm your contacts—there are many demands on them already. To get their attention on an issue you can use a variety of approaches, singly or in combinations. Your choice should reflect your local situation and be appropriate for the nature of your request. You may

- write a letter or send an email

- call them by phone (some states have toll-free access lines for officials in statehouses)
- ask for a meeting (exception: quasi-judicial decisions, which means literally functioning as a judge and refers to actions where lawmakers exercise judicial, not legislative, powers. A different set of rules applies to judicial conduct.
- use an intermediary (someone who worked on the official's campaign)
- make use of the **letter-to-the-editor** space in your newspaper (all officials read them)

### Action

Asking elected officials how to proceed to solve your problem is usually a positive way to involve them. They often like to offer advice, show their expertise, respond to small requests, or act as a go-between for citizens, and agencies and staff. Only when they function in a quasi-judicial role, as in many land-use decisions, are they expressly forbidden to have contact with proponents and opponents of the case.

Sometimes elected officials are reluctant to commit themselves. Initially, an open mind on their part may be adequate. If they will not volunteer comments revealing their point of view, do not be hesitant to ask them directly what their position is on the subject. Ask questions that pinpoint their positions, too.

### Influence

Working on appointive boards and committees gives insight into the process, and access to information, in addition to giving you a voice in policy formation. Ask to be considered for appointments, either from officials who have discretionary appointment powers (Mayors, County Commissioners, etc.), or from the Executive Department's staff in charge of keeping a file of qualified candidates. Detail your credentials and get on the list.

There are additional strategies for taking part in your community's political process:

- Get involved in the nominating and election process.
- Ask questions and record them on your phone at public meetings.
- Work on the campaign of someone who shares your views.
- Be a candidate yourself.

## Committee Level

### Information

All committees, whether they are the standing, citizen, or ad hoc type, have some common features. They typically are specialized on a single issue or subject area; they are advisory; and they are the place where the real work on proposals takes place. This is especially true for the state legislature's committees.

As preliminary information you will need to know the following:

1. Which committee deals with the subject of your concern?
2. Who are the members? Who is chair?
3. Which staff members are assigned to the committee for support?
4. How often are the regular meetings and where? What notice provisions exist for unscheduled meetings (assuming your state has an open meetings law)?
5. Who prepares the agenda? How can you get on it?
6. Are committee recommendations made directly to decision-makers or is there another level of review?

If you have more time for background research, it will be helpful to check on the members' length of time in office, their constituency, geographic region, and their voting record on related or similar issues.

### Action

In your presentation to the committee be clear on what you are asking them to do. You have a range of choices: requesting a specific action; stating the problem first, then offering your preferred solution; asking that the subject be studied; or explaining the problem and dropping it into their lap.

Most institutions move slowly and gradually. Drastic departures from policy require longer start up times. Incrementalism, or phasing the changes, increases the chance of the policymaker's acceptance.

If you have done your research well, you may be the specialist on the subject. Committee members may have some knowledge or use their staff's expertise. Depending on the committee's receptiveness to citizen participation, they may even rely on interested individuals or groups to bring issues to them (this is not the case at the legislature).

Decide ahead of time **what** you want. You are almost always in a better position if you initiate and advocate a solution.

In technical or especially complex subjects, it is a good idea to have some of the senior staff in the relevant department review your proposal informally. This achieves several objectives. Their trouble-shooting approach will weed out unworkable or weak areas and you will have a stronger proposal. It also will put them on notice, thus eliminating the surprise of reviewing something new. No one likes surprises. If you are lucky, they will be drawn in while helping you give shape to the proposal. You stand a better chance of getting committee approval if the staff is not opposed to it from the start.

There may be interest groups that have either not been involved in your deliberations or emerge too late in the

debate. Their cooperation may be necessary to win the policymakers' approval. This often improves the final solution.

Remember, few officials will go out on a limb in support of a controversial subject. Therefore, give some thought in advance to bargaining strategies, compromise solutions, or fallback positions. This is important for eliminating conflicts that polarize. Frequently the result of a polarizing controversy is inaction.

For a politically acceptable but perhaps difficult-to-achieve proposal, choose a qualified speaker who has status or is already known and respected by committee members.

For major changes in policy, you may need to use additional strategies. For example, lobbying committee members in advance, turning out in numbers with a crowd of affected neighbors, or marshaling full-spectrum political support, etc.

For an effective presentation remember to:

1. Be brief.
2. Be organized.
3. Provide background material.
4. Include a follow-up for review, reinforcement, answering questions and negative arguments and determining what needs to be done to win each individual vote.

## Councils/Boards/Commissions

Presentations to the full assembly of elected officials generally need careful advance preparation.

Some of the points made under the **Committee** section apply here as well. You need preliminary information on the members of the body, the chair, who among them wields influence, and who prepares the agenda. A courtesy call to the chair introducing your subject is valuable.

Contacting all members of the body individually should be an important part of your strategy, if you are lobbying for a specific proposal. Your immediate objective may vary from time to time; for example, introducing the issue, emphasizing your point of view, checking to see if there are questions you can answer, asking for their support, etc. Prior to significant action or a critical vote on a major issue, your follow-up contact should concentrate on reinforcing their support.

The structure of the meetings at this level tends to be more formal. They follow a customary pattern and often a printed agenda (available ahead of the meeting from the support staff) listing the sequence of action.

Inform yourself on the rules of testimony, including speaking sequence, rebuttal, and possible time limits. Be

aware that hearings are often recorded and you may have to use a microphone to speak.

Always identify yourself before speaking by stating your name and place of residence. Your questions (about process, documents, information) should be addressed to the chair. Questions to members of the body are unusual but can be granted by courtesy of the presiding officer. More commonly, members of the body will have questions of you.

If you plan to submit supporting documents, have enough copies for all members plus one for each key staffer. At a minimum, you should have one dated copy of your comments for the record.

As a rule, no comments from the audience are taken during the debate and deliberations among the policymakers. This is a matter of protocol, however, and does not have to be followed by smaller, less experienced or more informally operating councils.

Decisions are final unless appealed within a specified time period. You may want to find out before a hearing what procedures are followed for appeals. Who is eligible to appeal, what is the time limit, what format should be followed for filing, what are the reasons for granting an appeal, what are some of the questions you should ask. Your preparations will depend on what kind of hearing is used. Unless it is a *de novo* hearing, no new information will be admitted. The merits of the case rest on the material submitted previously.

Carefully select who will represent your group. Capable speakers with credentials or community prestige or a team approach representing diverse factions of the community are all good choices, depending on your situation.

Three examples of possible types of presentations are listed below, categorized according to their intent.

1. Intent to inform:

Presentations in this category are meant to acquaint the body with the issue, increase the level of awareness on it and the problem. You probably expect that your concern will be referred to a committee for action or recommendation. Perhaps you have already talked to the presiding officer about the likely choice of a committee.

Your purpose in making a presentation is to get initial, tacit authorization from all members to use time and resources on the issue. Besides, it signals the likelihood of future action.

## 2. Intent to persuade:

From all the possibilities, let us assume the subject has been reviewed by staff and a committee, and recommendations for a specific action have been made. Your presentation should cover highlights in summary form, stressing the best points and clearing up ambiguities. Address previous criticisms, if you can defuse a potential "no" vote.

## 3. Intent to dissuade:

If you undertake a presentation with the goal to dissuade a group of officials from a pending action, the process may be difficult. Whether you choose the rational attack or an emotional appeal should be dictated by your strategy, audience, and likelihood of a favorable decision. You may want to poll members of the body ahead of time to detect their commitments.

A well-documented, well-researched presentation detailing undebatable flaws or obvious shortcomings will score points with people who are persuaded by facts. Don't forget that political "facts of life" enter into the final decision as well. It helps a great deal if those are in support of your view.

An aggressive, strong attack, using emotional appeals filled with rhetoric to rally the public and get the attention of the media may not really persuade or dissuade the policymakers. However, you will inject controversy into the public arena, and may stall action for a while. You are not likely to win many friends among officials, staff, and the original supporters of the proposal.

Trying to persuade or dissuade the policymakers who have no prior committee work should be done after initial follow-up efforts have been made without success.

## Initiative/Referendum

In those states that permit citizens' direct access to legislative power this method is a "self-help" political technique of last resort when issues are ignored or avoided by policymakers.

Note the distinction: An **initiative** is a law drafted and proposed by citizens; a **referendum** is the public's vote on a law proposed by legislators. In either case, the process is the same. A specified number of valid signatures from registered voters will qualify the proposal for the ballot. The referendum can also be initiated by the legislators themselves.

The County Clerk's or City's Recorder's office will have appropriate forms and information on legal requirements.

## Media

No section on political action would be complete without a brief mention of the media's role.

The importance of using letters to the editor as an indirect way to reach public officials has been mentioned. The letters really have multiple functions. Other possible uses are free publicity, influence on the community's political climate, a forum for public debate, and reinforcement of other political action, such as campaigning.

Meeting with the editorial board of the newspaper, testing the opportunity for a human interest feature story, or being a guest on a radio program or podcast that deals with current events are other no-cost methods for involving the media in the debate on public issues.

## Story Problems

### Problem I: Public Library Funds Have Been Cut

**SCENE:** The city council now has fewer funds. One proposal for cutting city expenditures is to reduce the public library funding by half. If the number of open hours is reduced, the salary for the librarian can be cut to three-quarter time and the library assistant can be cut altogether. The librarian could recruit volunteers to help. Hours would be 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. instead of 1 p.m. to 8 p.m., but the library would no longer be open on Saturdays. Purchases of new books could be halted temporarily.

You are now in a community meeting to discuss the city council proposal.

Some people want to continue daytime hours for walking to the library, daytime activities for preschoolers, up-to-date resources for teachers, and having a place for students to do research after school.

Others think that a user fee could help with financing, or that all services have to be cut, and that the library isn't all that important.

### Problem II: Teenagers Hurt by a Drunken Driver

**SCENE:** Two teenagers (17 and 18 years old) were driving home from an out-of-town game. They were injured, one seriously, when they were side-swiped by a drunken driver. The driver was in his mid-thirties and had been arrested previously for a drunk driving offense. The case was dismissed because of lack of evidence. The driver had refused to take a breath test and the officer's word was not considered strong enough evidence.

With the new offense, the judge had fined the driver, suspended the license, and required the driver to attend an alcohol rehabilitation program.

You are in a neighborhood meeting. You have called these people together because you feel something must be done about this situation. People who drink and drive are a menace on the road and should not be allowed to drive, especially if they have a record of violations.

Some people say that rehabilitation programs are important and necessary. An occupational license allows driving to and from work. Others think it's too hard to get sound evidence and that adults should set an example.

### **Problem III: Land Use Problem— Miniature Golf to Build in the Neighborhood**

**SCENE:** A member of the community who owns a parcel of land in a residential area wants to build a "Pitch and Putt" miniature golf course on his property. Besides the outdoor game, there will be electronic games in the golf clubhouse.

Since it is a residential area, the planning commission must give permission to build a commercial business on a lot zoned for residential use.

This is an informational meeting being held by people in the neighborhood. It is a chance for people to discuss how they feel about the zone change and to talk with the land owner before it comes to a formal, or quasi-judicial, hearing before the planning commission. (Quasi-judicial is when existing rules or policies are applied to a specific case. The proceeding is not a legislative (law-making) process. Different rules for conduct of board, hearing, and testimony apply.)

Some people think the development will be a benefit to the community; kids will learn skills playing these games, and they will be closer to home and better supervised. Others are concerned that it will change the character of the neighborhood, creating parking problems and hazards for young children. They worry also about noise and lighted signs at night.

### **Problem IV: "Hard Times USA"—Choosing a Place to Do Business**

**SCENE:** This is a small town that is in a rural setting. A medium-sized city nearby has a number of larger chain stores that offer cut-rate prices. People in the town are shopping in the city to get the lower prices. As a result, the small businesses are going broke.

The director of the Chamber of Commerce and the mayor have called together a group of interested citizens to discuss the problem of businesses closing and what the city might do for economic stability. The meeting is informal.

Many people fear that the whole town will suffer if nothing is done. They say local merchants should be supported because they give better service. Others say that selection and prices of goods in the larger markets are always better and people will shop around for bargains.

### **Summary**

Many concerns touch our lives and we think someone needs to do something about them. In a democracy, we have the right and the responsibility to work towards change. By understanding how to work together with others who have similar concerns, we increase our chances to have an impact on decision-making.

- Understanding the dynamics of group action and knowing how to contribute to a positive group environment helps create satisfying relationships and the rewards of accomplishing group tasks.
- We stand a better chance to influence local issues if we keep in mind the need for factual information, networking, support groups and coalitions before taking action.
- Informed, effective action also requires knowledge about the political arena. Getting to understand the system and the process of public policy decision-making is basic to successful citizen participation.

The world can be changed by your efforts.... Even small changes can make a big difference.... You're just one step away.

### **Acknowledgment**

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