**Reaching out to your legislators
From the Curbside Chronicle**
By Ryan Kilpatrick and Matt Latham

**>> As lobbyists, it’s our job to communicate with legislators. It’s a profession that’s often misconstrued but it is necessary part of our representative democracy. We help educate legislators on issues outside their areas of expertise and explain potential outcomes of proposed legislation. But legislators shouldn’t just hear from us. They should also hear from the public. If you’re not working in this industry, communicating with elected officials might seem intimidating. But like voting, it’s crucial to our democracy.**

Issues at the State Capitol cover nearly every facet affecting the everyday lives of Oklahomans, including major issues such as healthcare and education. The sheer number and breadth of topics under state government’s authority are too daunting for any individual on their own. Legislators are required to cast votes on topics that they may not have encountered in their personal experience, but can greatly affect their districts and the state as a whole. This reality makes input from constituents and advocacy groups critical to providing lawmakers with a full picture of their district’s needs. Here are some things we’ve learned that’ll help you break through the noise with legislators.

**FIND THE RIGHT PERSON**

Elected officials are responsible for representing the constituents of their districts, not the whole state. What’s good for or popular in Oklahoma City may not be good for or popular in Idabel or Guymon. Your vote is much more powerful to those that actually represent your district. If you’re not sure who your elected officials are, then click on oklegislature.gov. Use the “Find My Legislature” tab on their website.

**BUILD RAPPORT**

Building a relationship before you have an ask is key. Get to know the candidates for your legislative seats during an election. Sign up for any district emails or newsletters they distribute and respond when you have feedback. Set up a meeting for lunch when they take office to get to know their priorities and to share your own. Building a relationship makes a specific ask more impactful when the time comes. The more you know about a politician - not just their policies - the easier it’ll be to tailor your message and be effective in your advocacy.

**GO TO THEM**

Depending on the time of year, your legislators may be receiving hundreds of calls and emails each day. Letters, calls and emails have value, but nothing compares to meeting your legislators in person. Stop by their office at the Capitol with a personal note or look for places they will already be. Following their social media accounts to see if they host a weekly constituent coffee or have an upcoming forum is a great place to start.

**KEEP IT SIMPLE**

If you don’t have time to catch your legislators in person, don’t worry. Send them a personal note or email – form letters and online petitions don’t have the same impact – or give their office a call. But remember, it might be one of those busy days where they are in nonstop meetings or hearing bills. Be brief, to the point and patient. Remember to provide your contact information and address so they know you’re their constituent.

**SHARE BOTH SIDES**

Whether it’s an issue in your district or an idea for the bill, honesty and transparency are the best policies. Even if you feel like it hurts your cause, legislators appreciate the honesty of someone who is willing to tell them both sides of a story. Odds are they will hear an opposing argument from someone else. It lets them know you are genuine and that they can trust you if you spell out where there are potential concerns, even if you don’t agree with those concerns. The last thing you – or they – want is for a legislator to be advocating on your behalf and get completely caught off guard by an opposing view.

**BE PATIENT**

Your legislators may not agree with you on everything, so you might find yourselves on different sides of an issue. They represent tens of thousands of constituents with many different life experiences informing their beliefs. Try to be understanding of this. Persuasion is a marathon and not a sprint. Demanding someone pulls a full 180-degree change on an issue isn’t likely to be popular. Look for small wins and not just big ones. And remember, being rude during a disagreement only hurts your cause.