

Planning a Site Visit with Your Legislator



A visit to conserved land or the location of an environmental restoration project may help a legislator (and their aides) better understand the positive impact of government conservation investments. This guide describes how the staff and volunteers of a conservation organization may organize a productive visit.

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- *Public access for outdoor recreation.* Invite community members who are enjoying the resource to participate.
- *Water resource protection.* Explain how the property protects the community's water supply for residents and businesses.
- *Farmland preservation.* Invite the legislator to try some of the food grown on the farm, such as freshly picked fruit, milk from a dairy farm, or something made from farm products, such as jam or cheese.

Introduction

An organized visit to a park, preserve, preserved farm, or other conserved land, or to the location of an environmental restoration project, may help a legislator (and their aides) better understand the positive impact of conservation investments on the communities they serve. It may help them particularly appreciate the value of government investments in these conservation efforts when the site visited has benefitted from a government grant. Such visits can also help build constructive relationships between the legislator and their constituents who are concerned about conservation.

The visit could involve a simple walk or something more substantial, depending on the legislator's interests and the opportunities available, for example:

- A hike or bicycle tour;
- Hunting or fishing;
- A tour of a farming operation;
- Participation in an activity with your organization's volunteers, such as a tree planting or trail maintenance;
- Family friendly activities that the legislator can bring their children or grandchildren to;
- A celebration of the recent protection of the site or the anniversary of its protection; or
- A press conference where you publicly thank the legislator for supporting conservation.

Planning the Event

What Kind of Visit?

When planning a site visit, be creative. Brainstorm ideas but remain flexible and work with your legislator and their staff to create an event that fits everyone's needs. Keep in mind that your legislator may not have more than an hour or two for the event.

In choosing a site, consider what benefits of conservation you want to highlight, for example:

When creating your event, remember to choose a site that provides the opportunity to tell a good story, is easily accessible, and will provide a winning visual backdrop for the event. It is best (but not always essential) that the site is in the legislator's district. To reinforce the importance of future state conservation investments, try choosing a site that has your organization conserved with the help of state conservation funding.

Inviting Your Legislator

If you already have a relationship with your legislator, contact them directly to discuss the event and what they would like to see.

If you do not yet have a working relationship with your legislator, call their district office and ask who handles scheduling in the district. You will likely work with the legislator's staff at first and may or may not end up talking with the legislator directly during the planning process. (Find your legislators' contact information)

You may be asked to put your request in writing. If this is the case, you can adapt this [sample invitation](#). In the request, include highlights of the planned event but emphasize your willingness to adapt the event content, duration, and timing to the legislator's needs. Include pictures and maps; they are great motivational tools. You may still need to follow up with a phone call.

When choosing possible dates for the event, check the General Assembly's web page to see when the [representatives](#) and [senators](#) will be in Harrisburg and when they will be in their district. Be sure to invite and cultivate relationships with legislative staff. They can be important allies. If you are planning the event with other organizations, it is helpful to identify one point of contact for the legislator's staff.

Who Else to Invite?

In addition to your legislator and their staff, you'll want to think strategically about whom to invite. You want your legislator to see the breadth of support for conservation, but you don't want too many voices since it might muddle the messages you wish to convey. Here are some participants to consider:

- *Owners* of the conserved land, particularly if they donated or bargain sold the land or conservation easement. While you may not be able to visit multiple properties, invite others who have conserved their land and highlight their personal stories, including pictures. Concentrate on landowners with compelling stories who can clearly articulate what preserving their land meant to them and how important it is to their community.

- *Members of your board or staff who have a personal relationship with the legislator.* Mention them in your scheduling request.
- *Key partners*, demonstrating the breadth of your support while thanking a partner for their engagement.
- *Local business owners that benefit from the conservation.* Invite members of the business community who can talk about the direct economic benefits of land conservation, for example, outdoor outfitters, a restaurant that serves visitors to the conserved land, a farm supply store that serves preserved farms, or even a local brew master who can speak to the necessity of clean water for good beer.

The Day of the Event

Highlight How the Community Benefits from Conservation

While touring the site, you will want to let your legislator know why the conservation project is important and how state funding made it possible. Give tangible examples of how the community at large has benefited from the land your organization is conserving. Examples of benefits include a new place for families to exercise and play together, securing a source of local food, protecting clean water, improving quality of life for community members, and protecting the community's rural quality.

Do not use generalities; be specific about how your community has benefited. If possible, give details about the economic benefits of the project, such as the sales a farm generates, the number of visitors to a park or trail, or increased sales by nearby businesses.

If relevant, emphasize how state funding was able to leverage private, local, or federal funding for the project.

Managing Multiple People

Although there may be multiple people at the site visit eager to share why the project is important, you don't want to overwhelm the legislator with too many people talking or bore them with people repeating the same message. Develop a game plan to see this through. For example, choose one person to take the lead on presenting the information.

This person can refer to others as appropriate, depending on their area of expertise or personal connection to the land.

Keepsakes

Providing a keepsake, like a framed print of the conserved land, can be used to thank your legislator for their support and encourage future support. Tell them a story about the property and use the presentation as a photo-op.

Maps

Maps of the property and surrounding area can be a helpful way to start a tour. If possible, use a map of the area to show other preserved lands so that the legislator gets a sense of context. Keep maps simple. Legislators and their staff may not be as accustomed to looking at maps as you are, and it can take them some time to acclimate to complex maps.

Details

Think through the event from the guests' point of view, from beginning to end. Do they have clear directions, know what time to be there, and understand what kind of physical demands and clothing is required? (Remember that legislators are often coming from and going to other events or meetings, so they won't always be dressed for the outdoors.) Is parking marked clearly? Are there handouts you want the legislator and their staff to have? How about water, snacks, bug repellent, sunscreen, etc.? Always know where the closest restroom facilities are.

Capturing the Event

Designate someone to take lots of pictures and take notes on the legislator's remarks and items that will require follow-up. These events can make great material for your newsletter or website.

After the Event

Thank You

Send thank-you notes to your legislator and their staff members for making time for the event and any help they provided in the planning process. Make sure everyone you've worked with receives a thank you. You may use an electronic thank you, but, as with a paper note, make sure it is personal.

Follow Up with Staff

Call the legislator's staff to fill them in on what was said and begin to pursue any needed follow-up, such as requests for further information. Send them pictures too.

Bring Your Event to the Next Level

Media Coverage

Press coverage can provide an incentive for the legislator to agree to the site visit, raise the profile of your organization, and draw attention to the importance of conservation funding. Before you start planning for media coverage, talk to the staff member responsible for the legislator's public relations. Ask how you can work together to bring the press to the event and best meet everyone's needs.

Media Alert

Media alerts help publicize events to the press ahead of time and serve as an invitation, encouraging reporters to attend and giving them sufficient notice to schedule their attendance. The media alert should be brief, no more than 300-400 words. Use an attention-grabbing first paragraph that summarizes your event. Identify all the event details (what the event is, who will be participating, why it is important, and where and when it will take place). The [WeConservePA library](#) contains a [general media alert template](#) that you can adapt to create your own.

Contacting Reporters

Make a list of your local newspapers, tv news outlets, radio, and online news outlets. Don't forget the growing number of online-only community news outlets. While news outlets will offer a general submission form or email address to send media advisories and press releases, establishing a personal connection with a reporter can make the difference in whether your story gets covered or not. If possible, identify which reporters are most likely to be interested in the event. (You can preface this with a note explaining that you have seen their previous coverage and thought this story would interest them). Other organizations in your area may be able to provide you with a list of media contacts.

After you have sent the media advisory, call each reporter. Reporters can get inundated with press releases, so making follow-up calls is very important. When you call, be sure to ask if it is a suitable time to talk, as they may be on a deadline. (The best times to call are between 10 am and 2 pm). Have a concise story pitch ready, no more than 30 seconds long. Don't get bogged down in details. Tell the reporter when and what the event is, how it is unique, and why it is important to the community. Identify what you will be able to offer the reporter, such as community voices, unique perspectives, and statistics. Let them know that the state legislator will be there. If they are not personally interested in the story, ask if there is another reporter who might be.

Press Conference

Consider holding a brief press conference where you can describe how preserving the property you are visiting has benefited the community and the overall importance of state conservation funding, as well as answer questions from the press. Before the press conference, you should choose a moderator, considering answers to potential questions and holding a rehearsal.

Preparing for the Press Conference

Moderator

The moderator will be responsible for convening the press conference, introducing the topics and speakers, and keeping the remarks of each speaker brief. It is the role of the moderator to briefly summarize the key points of the speakers and then open sessions to questions. It is the moderator's job to call on each reporter and then either answer the question or direct them to the appropriate speaker.

Who Should Speak?

Although many people may want to share their points of view, you don't want an event where multiple people say the same thing, nor an event where too many messages are delivered. Decide what messages you want to convey and who are the most appropriate people to deliver them. Other allies and supporters can stand with the speakers during the event and be introduced as supporters. It is also important to invite volunteers, community members, and other supporters to be in the audience. A full audience lets the legislator know that conservation has wide support. In most cases, the legislator will expect to hold speak or otherwise have the opportunity to engage with the reporters.

Questions and Answers

Consider possible questions and answers. If you are asked a question you cannot answer, don't be afraid to say you don't know and will get back to them later. A response to a misguided question might be: "That's a good question, but it is not within the scope of this press conference. Our focus today is on..."

Rehearsal

A brief rehearsal will allow the speakers to be more prepared, avoid excessive redundancy, and stay on message. If you cannot do this in person, think about going over the agenda on a conference call.

When Should it Be?

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday are the best days to hold a press conference because this is when reporters are most likely to be available. However, during the weeks the [House](#) or [Senate](#) is in session, Monday through Wednesday generally won't work for the legislator. Mid to late morning tends to work well. Print reporters generally do not like early morning events, and if the event is too late in the afternoon, they will have trouble meeting their deadlines.

At The Event

Highlight the Benefits to the Community

Give concrete, tangible examples of how the community has benefited from the conserved land. Make the connections specific to the community and emphasize personal components. Highlight how the state funding leveraged private, local, or federal funding for this project. Avoid conservation lingo. If reporters don't understand your language, they are likely to get it wrong when they craft their report.

Post Conference Interview

After the formal portion of the event, many reporters will want to conduct one-on-one interviews.

Press Packet

When journalists arrive, make sure they are each personally welcomed and given a press packet. Be sure to get their contact information. In the press packet, you will want to include your contact information, a copy of the [media alert](#), background information about the preserved property where you will be holding the event, and information about your organization.

Capturing the Event

Even with media in attendance, designate staff or a volunteer to take lots of pictures and take notes on the legislator's remarks and items that will require follow-up. If someone on your team has good videography skills,

consider recording the event and uploading it to your Facebook page or website.

After the Event

Press Release

Send out a press release as soon as possible after the event. A press release is more comprehensive than a media alert. Reporters often take directly from press releases for their articles, making them extremely important. The news release should review the highlights of the event and contain information about your land trust. It should include quotations from the legislator and the head of your organization (the executive director or board president), as well as authority figures (such as someone directly impacted by the land conservation work) to add authenticity and legitimacy to the release.

The recommendations for the appropriate length of a press release vary. Generally speaking, they should be between 400-800 words, but your local news outlets may have different length requirements. You can customize this [press release template](#).

Media Follow Through

Call or email reporters who attended to see if they need more information. Make sure they received a copy of the press release. Reporters may have had to miss the conference at the last minute. After all, you are competing with all the other news of the day. Don't worry. Send a press packet to these reporters soon after the conference and make yourself available for an interview. Include a photo or two from the event if you can.

If a journalist picks up your story, thank them. Tell them why it was important to your organization.

Organizational Communications

Post the release and photos on your web site and highlight the event on your social media outlets.

Special Considerations During an Election Season

501(c)(3) organizations are prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of, or in opposition to, any candidate for elective public office. This includes any action that endorses or appears to endorse a candidate.

For more detailed information on 501(c)3 organizations and elections, see the guide “[Elections and 501\(c\)3 Organizations](#).”

Also, view “[Candidate Appearances at your Nonprofit Event](#)” by NonProfit Vote.



The latest version of this guide and related resources are posted at WeConservePA.org.

WeConservePA staff prepared this guide. Some of the content was adapted in 2013, with permission, from the now-defunct Land Trust Alliance web page “Meet with Congress Over Recess.”

WeConservePA produced this guide with support from theWilliam Penn Foundation.

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v. 7/1/2021