

Your voice matters

As state legislatures and the U.S. Congress begin to find their footing in the new year, the push and pull of the political process has begun.

I have stated more than once in my time writing the director's column that democracy is a participation sport. It is true. My former boss, U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood, often told us that elected officials make choices on policy, but are driven by the people.

Your voice matters in Salem, Oregon, as well as Washington, D.C. What you believe in matters, but so does your approach to the issues.

Lobbying is often portrayed — by all sides and also the media — as ugly, back-room dealmaking with power-hungry politicians. The public does not see what really goes on, so now I will tell you.

Legislators are people too

Oregon has a citizen legislature made up of businesspeople, teachers, farmers, lawyers and others. These people serving our state possess a blend of personalities and political perspectives.

I honestly believe that each legislator is elected to fit the issues and needs of a particular district. Oregon is no different than other states in that regard. Urban and rural divides are part of life. Seeking economic and environmental balance is tough.

Like each member of the association, every legislator has an opinion. It is important to respect his or her point of view. Legislators have a lot of people meeting with them — pushing, pleading and threatening to unseat them on an array of issues that would boggle your mind.

A typical day for these citizen legislators includes participating in legislative committees, attending party caucus meetings where strategy is discussed, attending and voting when the House or Senate is in session, and taking numerous 15-minute meetings with constituents and interest groups throughout the day.

It is a grinding process. Some organizations pound the table in anger. Others understand the pressures and politics inherent in the process, and come with solutions in hand. The latter are viewed in a more positive light.

Legislative leaders want to hear your story

Over the past year, the OAN Government Relations Committee has met with every statewide elected official to engage, educate and advocate on behalf of the industry we serve.

This association's reputation is built on strong principles, bipartisanship, coalition building, and a philosophy of solving problems for the long term, rather than pursuing short-term political gains.

Legislative leaders want to hear our story. Moreover, they want to hear yours. It could be as simple as a timely email on a pressing issue. You could give invited testimony before a legislative committee, or participate at an OAN arranged meeting. The bottom line is that your voice matters.

There is no shortage of challenges and opportunities that will present themselves in 2015. Do not underestimate the ability of a single stroke of a legislative pen to impact how and where you do business.

Making an impact on the political process is really not all that complicated. Many of our volunteer leaders have testified over the years. They have made the biggest difference when they explained, in simple terms, how proposed legislation would impact their business.

Reason and problem solving are commodities that have enormous weight. After all, much like in business, success is all about relationships. It is not hard to get your way when an issue is non-controversial. When the legislation or issue is critical or turbulent, however, that's when you find out how successful an organization may be.

Your association has been extremely successful over the years on several landmark pieces of legislation. Examples include state estate tax reform, measures to reduce metal theft, the establishment of a driver's card, and creation of the state's first water supply fund and the agricultural water quality program.

The OAN worked very hard at the federal level to stop a USDA rule on prenotification of shipping nursery stock — something that in its original form would have harmed most of the Oregon nursery industry. Due to our relationships and hard work, this program now helps nurseries ship clean plants.

There are also countless bad bills in Salem that never see the light of day due to our reach in the political process. It is hard to prove the impact of this influence to the general membership, but many would have been harmed if the association and its members were not acting as a sentry. We could not do this without strong support and participation from our members.

Inside versus outside

There is a simple truth in politics: if you are not at the table, you are likely to be on the menu.

For this reason, the OAN has built a political brand of using reason to solve problems. Because of our balanced approach, the OAN is not only a strong voice for nurseries and greenhouses, but for all of agriculture.

The political pendulum may swing back and forth, and the people with the upper hand may change, but our approach means that people do listen. So when you receive a notice from your association to raise your voice and be heard, please take the time to respond. We need you. And we understand that you are our most valuable advocate! ☺



By Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Stone'.