

## Shaping National Leadership for Preservation in an Election Year

4.26.2006 - This is a tough budget year, but we've experienced many tough budget years and we've heard it's only going to get worse. This year, as in the last several years, we'll likely get level federal funding for core preservation programs. But as the cost of doing business increases, along with the cost of living, level funding means we get less each year.

In the big scheme of things, with cuts and elimination of programs, preservation funding has fared fairly well. But is fairly well really good enough?

Preservation builds community. It is nonpartisan and helps stimulate the local economy. Just about anyone seeking elected office has some interest in history, especially American history. Opposition isn't our primary problem - it's competition (real or perceived) with other national priorities. Preservation's obvious values (to us) are part of why we may have a hard time relating to those in elected office who continually tell us "no" (or don't do anything) when we ask for support.

So, how do we make preservation a national priority in a way that translates into increased funding and better incentives, and helps build and expand the preservation movement beyond what we've already accomplished?

On November 7, 2006, due to retirements and elections, the entire House of Representatives (435 seats) and a third of the Senate (33 seats) will be up for grabs.

During this election season, we need to underscore the relationship between preservation in our communities and what it takes to get elected at all levels of government. Will a candidate's support or lack of support for preservation make or break a campaign? How do you even begin to turn things around in your community if you've only got lukewarm or nonexistent support for preservation now?

Preservation and politics are, for the most part, local. This makes grassroots advocacy all the more important if we hope to shape Congressional leadership for preservation in our favor.

### The Political Resume

Before they were elected to national office, about 75% of the current House of Representatives and 68% of the Senate ran for state or local office. In the House, 32% were State Representatives or Senators, while about 20% ran for City or County Council (81 Reps). 7% of the current House ran for Mayor (31 Reps), 4% ran for Governor (18 Reps), and 2% for Lieutenant Governor (10 Reps). In the Senate, 41% ran for State Senate or Representative, 10% for City or County Council, 10% ran for Mayor, a little over 13% ran for Governor, and 7% ran for Lieutenant Governor. Many also ran for other state and local offices like Circuit Judge, Auditor, or for the local School Board.

Congress's collective resume also includes managers or staff on political campaigns. Some members of Congress started off as policy professionals working for elected officials or held political appointments before running for office. In only a few cases has someone run for national office without any experience in elected politics closer to home.

The typical political resume for national-level elected offices points to the need for grassroots engagement of potential preservationists in local and state races. Every time a candidate runs for office, we have an opportunity to shape support for preservation in government in a way that provides a strong basis for effective lobbying later on. Lobbying is only one piece within the bigger picture of advocacy and relationship building necessary for getting what we ask for.

In many cases, getting on a candidate's radar is easy. Many already like preservation, or their spouses do, or their interests are allied closely enough to preservation that connections are fairly obvious or easy to make.

### Candidate's Forums and Surveys

During election years, special interest groups commonly conduct a number of candidate's forums or circulate surveys to candidates as a way of ensuring that their issues get aired. Some preservation organizations and allied groups already produce forums or surveys - but we need to work together as a nationwide community to support more of these if we really want a positive sea change in Congress.

Forums and surveys are extremely valuable tools for raising awareness for incumbents and their challengers, and in some cases draw connections between the candidate and expert community members. A well-produced forum or a well-planned survey will include "briefs" and lists of community contacts that can help the candidate answer questions intelligently. Candidates like this kind of help and may remember you were professional and made them look good (especially if you're producing a public forum) when you need their help in the future.

For more on candidates' forums and surveys, visit:

<http://www.preservationaction.org/candidateoutreach.htm>

Not actively engaging during an election year reduces the chances that preservation will be perceived as a top priority, or at least an integral part of top priorities. If, for instance, mass transit and transportation is a clear public concern, posing a question about the candidates' views on how historic resources are treated in the design process might aid in future discussions and help leverage the best possible outcomes. (Remember, transportation planning may be the work of staff primarily, but large public projects do not operate in a political vacuum.).

Additionally, engaging candidates for national offices may require active partnership with groups like the state chapters of the American Planning Association, the American Institute of Architects, and other groups that have allied interests.

For sample questions for candidates running for the House of Representatives and Senate at the federal level, visit:

<http://www.preservationaction.org/06lobbying/questions.htm>

If you would like to set up a candidate's forum or survey and would like some advice, let us know.

### Actively Engaging the Media

Actively engaging the press is another element of comprehensive advocacy, and a part of making preservation a priority within government. Media relations professionals actively follow media history -- we should too. Clipping articles for content is one thing, but noting who is writing about what and how specific newspapers and news magazines cover an issue is another important piece in managing public image. Journalists' track record on topics (and an understanding that individual journalists have "beats" or areas of focus determined by their bosses) should help you understand which writers would cover your stories in a positive way.

Paying attention to local "hot topics" is also important. If, for instance, the state of local schools and education is an issue, you may figure out how teachers are using historic schools locally to educate students about local history. This sort of story is also visual -- it helps paint a picture of the value of preservation through a story involving people doing something in a specific, recognizable place with a great public benefit. Cultivating a relationship with the media that results in stories supporting preservation -- even if you or your organization is never named in the article, radio or television piece -- helps raise awareness of the issue in a way that supports preservation work and catches the attention of elected officials.

Working with the press in this way is a skill that requires experience, sensitivity and media and/or public relations contacts. If you or your colleagues do not have this skill, you should seek professional help - ideally from a member of your Board or by hiring new staff. Outside "hired guns" will be able to help you to a point, but can be limited by their not having a relationship with the community, local history or first-hand experience with neighborhood politics.

### Thanks for the Memories

Elected officials are not ATM machines. Relationships between individuals, groups and elected officials often take time. Parties, awards, and other public events are great ways to jumpstart a relationship with an elected official or nurture one that's already started. Events held in local historic places are very effective. A brief program explaining how

the event site was threatened, saved and rehabilitated will likely create a lasting memory for your elected official and their staff.

Events are also a good way to show who you are and what preservation is about. Events comprised entirely of "movers and shakers" have their place, but elected officials often respond well to groups that demonstrate some "generational depth" that is, include younger people (who may or may not be movers or shakers, at least right now).

Those seeking or maintaining elected office generally have a pretty good memory. An investment in events opened up to elected officials (local, state and national) will likely pay off down the road when you're asking for something.

### Cultivating Local Leaders

At all levels of elected office, interest groups and political parties look within their ranks for viable political candidates. These groups consider a number of factors such as a track record of support for a given cause, charisma/popular appeal, and their chances of success (many factors involved). And sometimes, getting good people to run for office requires that one of our ranks actually steps up and does it.

We also need to be able to recognize leadership potential in community activists, developers, and other accessible, inspiring self-starters who have demonstrated a commitment to preservation. This effort should, ideally extend to leaders within our own community who will never run for office, but will be tomorrow's Executive Directors and other "designated hitters" within the field. These people are our non-elected representatives and play a vital role in the public's perception of who we are.

### Getting Smarter

If at first we don't succeed, try, try, try again? Maybe the better strategy is thinking about why we don't succeed in the first place. We've been asking for an increase to the federal appropriation for core preservation programs for years, but funding remains level. We asked for a tax credit for historic homeowners -- and have received a great deal of support from Congress for that credit -- but here we are in 2006 with an unrealized great idea. Why don't we have that credit? Why did we have so few members of Congress sign onto letters supporting adequate federal funding for core preservation programs this year? What did we learn from our effort to secure a Conservation Trust Fund for preservation and environmental programs?

Preservation Action is analyzing these issues and will be providing you with insights we hope will help us build our lobbying network strategically. This is how we hope to grow from about 800 members to thousands.

Actively defining relative community values -- which translate into Congress's priorities - - takes a bit of humility, strategic thinking and openness toward change. Change is an integral part of the electoral process, and is an inevitable part of public policy. So long as

our advocacy efforts are comprehensive, sustained and thoughtful, and we take personal responsibility for our role in the effort, we stand a good chance of seeing good changes, not bad.

We have become much more professional in many elements of preservation -- in administration, conservation, development, law and policy. We need to work together to be better advocates at the national level, expand our grassroots network, take a long view, and be responsible for the future of the movement and the field while we're taking care of the important business of saving and reusing historic places nationwide. What we're trying to accomplish is too important for an ad hoc approach.

### Part of the Solution

A rising tide floats all ships. We need to work together to make preservation more relevant at all levels of government.

We need your help to shape the ideal Congress and a future for preservation that is much better than the status quo. We need a lot more local advocates in our network -- and we need them now. We're looking for at least 100 preservationists, on average, in each state to join Preservation Action. We need people who will speak out locally, and who will work with us to improve our chances for success in Congress and within the federal government in general.

Preservation Action will continue to provide you with updates about what's going on here, and will let you know when you should speak out, but we're also taking a comprehensive approach to federal level advocacy that includes elements of the various pieces mentioned above. We're dedicated to shaping national leadership for preservation from the grassroots up and will provide you with insights and information to help you engage effectively in elected politics - and grassroots lobbying, of course.

Working together as an effective, politically savvy grassroots network we can help shape an ideal Congress that improves preservation policy not because its members support preservation as a special interest but because they could not imagine doing anything else.

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