

# Advancing Your Agenda: Effective Advocacy In Annapolis

by Cynthia Golomb

Most of us lead such busy lives—working, maintaining our homes, attending to our children, managing relationships, keeping fit—that when we think of the government, we tend to focus on the latest events in Washington, D.C. or on preparing our altogether too complicated tax returns. When a crisis hits, however, the importance of another capital, Annapolis, becomes obvious. The role that state government plays in areas of law affecting our everyday lives is critical.

To advance your agenda—be it personal, political or business—in Annapolis, the basic procedural workings of the General Assembly must be understood. In a nutshell, members of the General Assembly, composed of the House of Delegates and the Senate, consider bills which, if voted on favorably by both bodies of the General Assembly and not vetoed by the Governor, will become laws in the state of Maryland.

Ideas for legislation come from many sources, including individual constituents, various task forces and organizations, legislators and the Governor. Before a bill becomes a law, it must be introduced by a sponsor in the House, filed with the clerk, read for the first time in the House, referred to the appropriate Committee for a hearing, reported out of committee, sent to the floor of the House for a second reading where it may be amended, and sent to the floor of the House for a third reading where the bill can be debated and can be approved or rejected. This same process is repeated in the Senate.

Both chambers of the General Assembly must pass exactly the same piece of legislation before it arrives at the Governor's desk. To resolve differences in the versions of bills passed by the House and Senate, a conference committee, composed of Delegates and Senators from appropriate committees, is appointed. A bill that emerges from a conference committee must be once again voted on favorably by both the House and Senate before the governor can take action on it.

The procedures in the General Assembly are designed to make it difficult to pass legislation. Each year hundreds of bills are introduced in both the House and Senate, and only a small number emerge from the General Assembly and become law. What, then, can be done to advance your particular agenda in Annapolis?

To begin, it is vital that the issue of concern to you be something that is within the scope of the General Assembly's jurisdiction. The work of the General Assembly



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concentrates on the Annotated Code of Maryland. Your idea must be articulated in the form of a bill that will affect the Code.

Second, it is important to think through your reasoning for the proposed change in the Code and to gather evidence supporting your idea. It is not necessary to have evidence in the form of a Ph.D. thesis or a Supreme Court brief, but legislators generally react favorably if the advocate of a change in the Code can provide information on the issue.

Third, if possible, it is usually a good idea to develop your ideas and present them to legislators before the hectic 90 day session begins.

During the time that the General Assembly is in session, citizens have an opportunity to communicate their concerns to legislators in a variety of ways. Depending on the subject, a bill will be assigned to a particular committee. The committee will hold a hearing on the bill and vote to determine whether the bill will move forward. Citizens can voice their opinion on a bill at the hearings held by the relevant committee, by submitting written testimony to the legislators on the committee, or by calling the legislators' offices directly. Most bills never emerge from committee. Advocates of bills who are organized and persistent about communicating to legislators have a much better chance of success than those who do not remain involved in the process.

Fortunately, access to the Internet makes keeping tabs on activities in Annapolis easier than it used to be. Nevertheless, nothing replaces good old-fashioned shoe leather—walking the halls and visiting directly with legislators can never be replaced by high technology.

Remember, when something prompts you to think, "There ought to be a law," know that you, as an individual, with your neighbors, or as a part of a trade or business group—can do something to make it happen. While the process is complex, it is by no means beyond the reach of those committed citizens willing to invest some of their time, energy and resources to participate.

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