

# REAL WORLD ADVOCACY = DISASTER PLANNING

BY KAREN ACKERMAN WITTER

Advocacy with elected officials is often described as similar to donor cultivation. Strategies include getting to know people before asking for anything, understanding their interests and motivations, and cultivating long-term relationships. Museums routinely engage in donor cultivation and expect there will be a good return on their investment. There are many examples of advocacy leading to positive results, such as tax referendum passage, governmental financial support or public support for a new project. However, advocacy with elected officials is often relegated to the back burner because museum leaders don't anticipate a benefit that warrants the investment. I am increasingly convinced that museums should consider advocacy as a form of disaster planning.

Given the issues facing Congress, state legislatures and cities all over the country, it is more likely that museums will be adversely impacted, rather than positively affected, by proposed policies, ordinances or legislation. For example, is your institution prepared to produce additional revenue if property tax exemptions are reduced or eliminated? Ongoing advocacy is an essential investment to prepare for a disaster: federal, state or local government policies or legislation that adversely impact your institution's mission.

The National Council of Nonprofits reports that in 2013-14, states passed

more than 66,700 bills while Congress passed just 296. In 2015, 20 states are facing budget shortfalls totaling over \$50 billion. As states wrestle with significant budgetary challenges and pass thousands of bills every year, there are many ways nonprofits could be adversely affected. Tim Delaney, president and CEO of the National Council of Nonprofits, cites several examples: a proposal by the governor of Maine allowing cities to tax all charitable property, a local tax assessor in Florida who tried to remove exemptions by reclassifying nonprofit property as taxable and numerous proposals in North Carolina to take away resources from nonprofits.

A few years ago, significant proposed changes to the Missouri Museum Property Act would have forced 95 percent of Missouri's museums and historical sites out of compliance with the law. Linda Endersby, past president of the Missouri Association for Museums and Archives, conveys these lessons learned: be sensitive to how the legislative process works in your state, go talk and be seen, and don't just send e-mails.

In Alaska, legislation was introduced to place a five-year moratorium on the Percent for Art Program and Art in Public Places Fund. Kes Woodward, president of the Alaska Arts and Culture Foundation, commented, "Taking quick action when a crisis arises is critically important, but even

more vital is ongoing advocacy for the arts—both from artists and from the businesses and citizens who are impacted by these programs."

In Illinois, a state law was changed that removed museums from the list of approved professional development providers through the state board of education. Museums learned about the issue when the board proposed administrative rules to implement the new law. Museums were not at the table when the legislation was developed and passed, changing requirements for professional development providers. This year, the new governor of Illinois announced his intent to close the 138-year-old Illinois State Museum in Springfield and all of its branch facilities as a cost-saving measure due to a budget impasse with the state legislature.

Many museums are part of governmental entities such as park districts, cities, state agencies and universities, and can be affected by internal changes in policies and budgetary priorities. In Iowa, a new provost at the University of Northern Iowa proposed closing the university's museum as a cost-saving measure. In spite of a massive effort by students, faculty and the community, and support from external organizations, the museum building was closed. Cyndi Sweet, director of the Iowa Museums Association, makes a compelling statement: "We as a field

need to do a better job of educating the public and legislators in particular that objects are donated to a museum collection in trust for future generations. We need to shout that we are stewards of these items. And we need to shout it with one very loud voice. None of us can make a difference alone shouting in the wilderness. We need to be clear about our value year round, every day, as educators, stewards and community anchors so when the budget gets tight we aren't seen as disposable organizations."

These are just a few examples of actions by policy makers that can have far-reaching impacts on museums. Some proposals affect an individual museum while others impact museums collectively. Sometimes proposals intentionally impact museums; sometimes a proposal may be focused on another issue but produce unintended consequences for museums. Impacts on museums can be collateral damage from bigger issues and agendas, such as serious budgetary challenges. Museums, the arts and culture are often seen as nice but not essential when policy makers consider budget cuts. In all of these cases, the time to get engaged in advocacy is *before* there is a crisis. It is important to engage in advocacy not only for your own museum but also as part of field-wide advocacy for museums and nonprofits.

Here is a "Top 10" list for adopting advocacy as another aspect of disaster planning:

**10.** Don't ever think, "That will never happen." No one expected the governor of Illinois to propose shuttering the Illinois State Museum system, especially when

the museum was developing plans to commemorate the upcoming statehood bicentennial.

- 9.** Cultivate relationships before you need anything. A period of crisis is not the moment to be introducing yourself to elected officials and other stakeholders.
- 8.** Repeat number 9—often. This is not a once-and-done activity. Elected officials change; staff members change; community leaders change. Maintaining long-term relationships, as well as cultivating new contacts, needs to be a continuous effort.
- 7.** Be a part of your community—not apart from your community. Community leaders need to be invested in your institution and consider it not just nice but essential. Is your institution and are your board members, leadership team and staff members well known among your business community, education sector, arts community and elected officials at the local, state and federal levels?
- 6.** Make sure community leaders and elected officials know the value of your museum. Can they speak extemporaneously at a moment's notice about the importance of your museum to their constituents?
- 5.** Compile and tell your stories continuously. Engage people's hearts with the stories of how your museum makes a difference. Museum educators can collect stories from teachers and students about the impact of your museum. Museum registrars and curators of collections can provide information about the significance of objects in the collections. They can also record stories about

why individuals donate objects to your museum and the positive results.

- 4.** Collect valuable data. Document the impact of your museum with facts and figures. Develop a statement demonstrating the economic impact of your institution and of other museums collectively in your community. AAM offers a simple template for an economic impact statement and sample statements from individual museums and groups of institutions ([aam-us.org/advocacy/resources/economic-impact-statement/samples](http://aam-us.org/advocacy/resources/economic-impact-statement/samples)).
- 3.** Develop champions. Broad-based support from diverse constituents is important, but in a time of crisis it is also critical to have champions who will be strong advocates for your institution. Recruit multiple champions who have influence at the local level and with state legislators and members of Congress. Cultivate lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to be your champions.
- 2.** Make advocacy everyone's responsibility by encouraging staff and board members to advance and speak for your museum's mission. Volunteers and front-line staff members who communicate with the public can invite visitors who have had great experiences at your museum to write letters to the editor, comment on Facebook or other social media platforms, and share their experiences with others. Board members can communicate with community leaders and elected officials about why they choose to support your institution.
- 1.** Create a culture of advocacy by

making advocacy a strategic priority. Engage your board members in advocacy. The [standforyourmission.org](http://standforyourmission.org) website is an excellent resource for board members to learn even more about the power and fun of board advocacy.

By engaging everyone involved in your organization and integrating your stories into a year-long advocacy plan, you can create a culture of advocacy and continuously communicate the value of your institution. Do simple things, but do them often. As former AAM President Ford Bell said, “Museums must maintain a consistent and relentless drumbeat of communication to our civic leaders, extolling the value of museums.” Beat the drum. ‹‹

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