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. Despite 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

REAL WORLD ADVOCACY = DISASTER PLANNING

BY KAREN ACKERMAN WITTER
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 genera-
tions. 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; some-
times a proposal may be focused on
another issue but produce unintended
consequences for museums. Impacts
on museums can be collateral dam-
age from bigger issues and agendas,
such as serious budgetary challenges.
Museums, the arts and culture are of-
ten seen as nice but not essential when
policy makers consider budget cuts. In
all of these cases, the time to get en-
gaged in advocacy is before there is a
crisis. It is important to engage in ad-
vocacy 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, educa-
tion 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 con-
tinuously. Engage people’s hearts
with the stories of how your museum
makes a difference. Museum educa-
tors can collect stories from teachers
and students about the impact of
your museum. Museum registrars
and curators of collections can pro-
vide information about the signifi-
cance 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 state-
ment 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).

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 responsi-
ability 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 experi-
ences with others. Board members
can communicate with commu-
nity 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 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. «

Karen Witter is an independent museum consultant and external affairs advisor at the University of Illinois Prairie Research Institute. She retired from the Illinois State Museum and served for 35 years in Illinois state government in a variety of leadership positions. She is a past president of the Association of Midwest Museums and former long-time board member of the Illinois Association of Museums. She frequently speaks about advocacy at state, regional and national museum association conferences.