

Got something to say to a legislator? Try these tips

By [Katie Drake](#)

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Rep. David Litvack, center, talks to Fraser Nelson, left, and... (Rick Egan/The Salt Lake Tribune)

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With the March 5 deadline looming, the 2008 Legislature is in full swing, but several huge issues remain undecided.

With so many bills remaining on the table, Utah residents can still voice their opinions to their legislators. The challenge comes in assuring that the state senator or representative gets the message.

Legislators are under a constant assault of information, and knowing a few insider tricks will increase the likelihood of your opinion making it into debate, said Chris Bleak, spokesman for the Utah House of Representatives. Whether through e-mail, phone calls or actually going to Capitol Hill, messages that are short and to the point will get you noticed.

E-mail is generally agreed to be the easiest way to get your point across, but several key items will increase its effectiveness. Bleak said the quicker you can get the point across, the better. He recommended focusing on one or two key points, briefly expressing your opinion and providing several ways for your legislator to contact you if there are questions.

Missives have the most impact when the author is immediately identified as a constituent. Bleak recommended including your full name, street address and phone number in every communication, which will help your concerns rise above the hundreds of others each legislator receives every day.

Sen. Scott McCoy, D-Salt Lake City, said e-mail is particularly easy now that all legislators have state-issued BlackBerrys, allowing them to retrieve messages in seconds. McCoy carries his at his waist, and it buzzes every time a message comes in. Phone calls are also a good option, but it can be difficult to catch legislators at home during the busy session.

Visiting your legislator on the hill is bound to make an impact as well. McCoy said seeing constituents in person has a great impact on him because it shows a huge level of commitment to an issue. Whichever option you choose, McCoy says making your presence known physically always helps.

"You're a lot more likely to catch my attention if you are standing in front of me or

making my waist vibrate," McCoy said, referring to his BlackBerry.

For Rep. David Litvack, D-Salt Lake City, relationships are the cardinal rule. He says phone calls and e-mails are an easy way to express an opinion on a bill, especially if you simply want your vote counted and don't need a response from your legislator. But he suggested constituents cultivate a personal relationship with their legislators if they are concerned about more complex issues like immigration. Litvack loves to engage his constituents in dialogue and says phone or in-person conversations are much more personal to him.

"It's a lot easier to find common ground through that kind of conversation," Litvack said.

Litvack acknowledged developing this kind of close relationship is next to impossible during the legislative session, but the door-to-door campaigning that is sure to be part of this year's election is a great place to start.

If you are unable to make contact with your legislator, Bleak says there are other options. He recommends talking with legislative staff and interns assigned to each legislator, who can pass along your message.

"These people are with them constantly," Bleak said.

Bleak himself often serves as a liason between citizens and public officials.

"I tell the speaker [Rep. Greg Curtis, R-Sandy] things all day long that I hear from different people and different citizens," Bleak added.

If an issue you are passionate about does not resolve the way you want it to, don't despair. As soon as the session ends, work begins for the next year. The relaxed atmosphere creates a perfect opportunity to get the issue reviewed by your legislator and to have potential solutions evaluated, including new legislation, for the 2009 session.