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OPINION: SEMINOLE MAYOR LESLIE WATERS – TIPS FOR BEING A SUCCESSFUL ADVOCATE

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TB Reporter does not take editorial stands; however, we do accept opinions from others. Today, Seminole Mayor Leslie Waters, a former speaker pro-tem in the Florida House of Representatives, gives advice on ways to be successful when urging your elected officials to act or take a position. Waters said, “Your business bottom line may depend on it!”

PINELLAS COUNTY – Seminole Mayor Leslie Waters has been on both sides of the podium – advocating for an issue and listening to those asking her to take a stand. She offers her advice on the best way to approach elected officials to successfully get your point across.

“Effective advocating is *not* keeping fingers crossed and sitting on the sidelines hoping elected officials will do the right thing, or sending one e-mail or making one phone call,” Waters said. “As advocates we must take it upon ourselves to communicate with legislators all year round – before, during and after the Legislative Session.”

One – Know your government; be familiar with the legislative process.

Contact the *Pinellas County Supervisor of Elections* for a copy of the current *Citizen Guide* that provides contact information for elected positions that you vote for every two, three, four or six years.

Check your voter information card for U.S. Congress, Florida Senate, Florida House, County Commission and School Board district numbers, as well as voter registration and precinct numbers.

Observe a county Legislative Delegation Meeting. Attend a legislative town hall meeting. Drop-in at a district office open house.

Be familiar with your state representative, state senator and their staffs.

Be familiar with legislative terminology: Organizational, Regular, and Special Sessions; Special Order and daily calendars; Committees, Subcommittees and Conference Committees; quorums, veto override, Senate and House Journals; bill drafting, bill signings; first, second and third readings; revenue sources, reports, votes, proceedings, budgets, caucuses, public hearings, re-districting, rule of law, statutes, elections, amendments, amendment-to-the-amendment, suspending and tabling, motions, proclamations, and resolutions and regulations; President of the Senate, Speaker of the House, President Pro-Tempore, Speaker Pro-Tempore, Clerk, Sergeant at Arms, Secretary of the Senate, Committee Chairmen, Staff Directors, Legislative Aides, Page and Messenger programs, Robert's Rules of Order, etc.

Be familiar with how an idea becomes law.

Two – Build a business relationship with your local legislators.

Invite local legislators and/or key legislative leaders for a tour of your workplace, and for introductions to co-workers.

Invite them to various company or city events – annual picnic, ground breaking, ribbon cutting, employee recognitions, and award events.

Educate, provide examples, share a story relating to an issue – the importance of Constitutional Home Rule to cities and towns throughout Florida, college funding formula, challenges of Florida farmers, school safety suggestions, etc.

Three – Political Action is a business strategy.

Put together an annual company, council advocacy plan, similar to an annual budget plan.

Decide which legislators to visit in their district offices as well as in Tallahassee.

Be sure to visit with legislative leaders that impact your business, profession, association or municipal interests.

Four – Visit the legislative district office, offer to be a Key Contact, plan a visit to Tallahassee.

Make appointments to speak with your legislators; perhaps one or two others would like to accompany you. Present your business card. All attendees should be knowledgeable on the issues at hand. Be cordial and respectful to office staff, they are crucial to your ability to advocate effectively. Expect 15 minutes with the legislator. Plan a “Day on the Hill” each year.

Five – Be prepared, and dress appropriately.

Focus on just one or two issues per visit. Don't try to overwhelm with too much information. Provide a one page white paper or list of bullet points. Include your contact information. Legislators deal with scores of issues while in Session – issues dealing with insurance, environmental, education, home rule, criminal justice; appropriations, etc., so keep your conversation pithy!

Professional attire is suggested.

Six – Be open about the pros and cons of legislation.

Be familiar with all sides of the legislation. Be forthright. Be prepared to share the advantages and disadvantages of the legislation being advocated. If you don't, opponents will!

Seven – Be prepared. No winging your presentation.

Reference bill numbers of targeted legislation and bill title – Senate bills are SB (even #) and House bills are HB (odd #). Select one main spokesperson. Be succinct. Get to the point. Be flexible. Track issues. Follow-up after presentation. Offer to provide additional information if needed.

Eight – Enjoy being in the state Capitol, relish being part of the political process, but take care of business.

Always use appropriate titles “Representative,” or “Senator” or “Madam Chairman.” Even if you are golfing buddies, still use appropriate titles for this important business meeting.

Be flexible with your presentation. Don't get into any arguments. Listen carefully. Remember: The purpose of this visit is to make a point and that point should be quite clear before the end of the meeting.

Nine – Monitor your key bills as they proceed through the process.

Before legislation makes it through the committee process, additional information may be needed. Keep in touch with staff; they are important “gatekeepers.”

After the Legislature adjourns and the *sine die* ceremony occurs, e-mail a “thank you” to the legislator for their attention to your issue. If the legislator helped to pass it, great. If they voted “no,” respectfully share your disappointment. If the bill did not pass, there is always next year. A fresh approach may be needed.

Ten – Perk-up during the election season, know the candidates, support candidates. Vote!

Support the candidates that support you. Your business, education issues, city and neighborhoods. Contact the candidate and ask how you can help their campaign.

Campaign contribution of money and/or time is always appreciated. Host a fundraiser, wave signs. Put a yard sign in your front yard and/or store front window. Introduce them around the community, at city, church and business events. Invite the legislators and/or candidates to be a guest speaker.

Post political and legislative events and pictures on social media. Give positive press to your issues and to your elected officials of choice.

Attend political rallies, forums and meet and greets.

Vote-by-Mail – contact the Supervisor of Elections and request a Mail Ballot Request Form. Receipt of ballot six weeks before election day allows for more time to study amendments and analyze candidates. Track ballots online.

For information about Waters, go to myseminole.com.

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