

*how to be a . . .*  
**transportation**  
*advocate in washington*



A *Playbook* for Competing in the Big Leagues



**Carter=Burgess**

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Floridians for Better Transportation  
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## Foreword

"I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone. -Dwight D. Eisenhower

Long before President Eisenhower came to town, our nation's capitol was giving its support to the Washington Senators major league baseball team. Unfortunately, baseball later moved away from the banks of the Potomac River, but the really big game in town - POLITICS (deciding who gets what and when) - has continued to be played year-round, rain or shine, inside the D.C. beltway.

This informative and straightforward handbook was written to help individuals or groups interested in being a "Transportation Advocate" in Washington participate more effectively in the game called congressional politics and the legislative process. While I don't claim that it is "the" definitive work on the subject, I do firmly believe that it can serve as a basic playbook on the fundamentals of the Washington, D.C. game.

This booklet was born out of practical personal experience gained over many years of working on political campaigns, district and legislative staffs in a member's office, and as the federal affairs director with a large state DOT. It is my sincere hope that the suggestions provided here will prove beneficial to anyone wanting to strengthen their efforts to "get in the game" of congressional relations.

Doug Callaway  
President of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT)

## About the Author

Douglas J. "Doug" Callaway is currently the president of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT). Prior to joining FBT, Callaway was a transportation program manager in Carter & Burgess' headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas. He also served as the Federal Programs Coordinator for the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), where he served on the staff of the Secretary of Transportation for 12 years. While there, he helped to direct FDOT's activities relating to federal policy creation and intergovernmental liaison. During his tenure with FDOT, Mr. Callaway spent three years in Washington, D.C., contributing to the enactment of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) on behalf of Florida and other donor states.

In January 2001, he was named to the Transportation Advisory Committee for the transition effort of President George W. Bush. Mr. Callaway has also served on the TEA-21 Reauthorization Steering Committee and related task forces for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

Before working at FDOT, Mr. Callaway was on the staff of former Congressman Tom Lewis for six years, the last three and one-half in Washington, D.C., where he became the Congressman's Legislative Director on Capitol Hill. He also served as Organizational Director for the campaign of Congressman E. Clay Shaw, Jr. in 1982.

*Mr. Callaway would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by Ms. Tonia Ramirez, of the Texas Department of Transportation, in the production of a previous, earlier AASHTO version of this handbook many years ago.*

# Introduction: Getting Into The Game

The national consulting firm of Carter & Burgess, Inc. is pleased to provide this handbook as a service to its clients. Consistently listed at the top of a variety of rankings of A/E/CM (Architecture/Engineering/Construction Management) firms, Carter & Burgess is a full-service firm offering consulting services to the transportation, land development, public works, communication, retail and building industries. The firm has been in continuous professional practice for more than 60 years. Over the last 10 years the firm has experienced rapid, sustained growth, and has expanded geographically to office locations in every region of the country.

## *Principles of Effective Congressional Relations*

A great many colleges and universities today offer degrees in Political Science. Unfortunately, in practice there is little or nothing scientific about politics. Politics is actually much closer to an intuitive art form than a scientific process. While this may sound elementary, it is vitally important for any organization - especially transportation organizations steeped in the hard science of engineering - to recognize that it is fundamentally impossible to "engineer" solutions to issues that are political in nature.

You can become involved in the legislative process without becoming a "big-time" lobbyist. You and your organization can provide a wealth of information on how legislative initiatives affect transportation at both the national and local levels. You can help legislators do their jobs by pointing out how their legislative proposals affect the public users of transportation facilities in their areas. To accomplish this goal, however, you need to get involved with the team of people who help bring transportation systems, services, and funding to your state.

Former House Speaker Tip O'Neil was fond of the maxim that "all politics is local." My corollary to Tip O'Neil's maxim is that "all politics is personal." Simply put, without a relationship with your member(s) of Congress and, specifically their staff, you won't get very far in capturing federal transportation funding. Your ultimate goal should be to have the members of Congress or

other elected officials soliciting your views regularly on issues important to transportation. Become an active, reliable member of the transportation legislative team.

Today, transportation organizations must recognize not only the need to represent their area's transportation interests in Washington, but the absolute legitimacy of their actions as well. This playbook intends to provide some basics on how to do just that.

### ***Key Plays***

- Politics is not scientific: You can't "engineer" solutions to issues that are essentially political in nature.
- Callaway's Corollary: "All Politics Is Personal".
- Work to have members of Congress seek your views on transportation issues.
- By following this "playbook," you can become an active, reliable member of your area's transportation legislative team.

# The Washington Scene: Knowing the Players

"Half of something is better than all of nothing."  
-B.K. Roberts

## *The Importance of Good Staff Relations*

Compared to state legislative activities, working in Washington is much more staff-related. Most contacts in D.C. take place not directly with the individual member of Congress, but with either personal or committee staff. Some may initially balk at having to meet with a young, non-technically oriented staff member instead of the Congressman or Senator themselves. However, it is the staffer who will be your primary link with a member's office or committee. For that reason, it is in your best interest to cultivate a positive working relationship with congressional staff members built upon trust and a clear understanding of what type of information or help they might need.

The best way to establish a good relationship with staff members is simple — listen to them. The following story about President Franklin Roosevelt illustrates the importance of really listening to what is said.

*As President of the United States, Franklin Roosevelt often endured long receiving lines at the White House.*

*Complaining that no one really listened to what he said, he decided to try an experiment.*

*As people came through the line, he shook their hands and murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you sir."*

*It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Never blinking, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."*

## **The Capitol**

Adjacent to our nation's capitol are two states separated by the Potomac River, Maryland and Virginia. Although close in geographic proximity, these states are very different from each other, with each state projecting a unique character and feel. Similarly, the U.S. House of Representatives and the United States Senate, though literally housed in the same building on Capitol Hill, are also very different from each other. Each legislative body presents unique opportunities and challenges based upon the different methods of operation, atmosphere, history, and self-image.

## **The House of Representatives - "The People's House"**

The House often tends to be where transportation authorization bills are first introduced. Given its large membership of 435, the House legislative process is usually subject to stricter time constraints and rules for germaneness than is the Senate process. This factor leads to a somewhat higher level of predictability as to when bills will be considered and acted upon. Additionally, because the House membership is more than four times larger than the Senate membership, securing a simple 218 majority is no simple task. Since House members represent congressional districts that are usually subsets within a state rather than the entire state, they sometimes have an understandable tendency to be more parochial in their orientation. And because every House seat is up for re-election every two years, there is often a greater sensitivity to changes in the political climate. All these factors taken together help to explain why the dynamics of the House are so dramatically different from those found in the Senate.

In the House, the two main committees with jurisdiction for transportation issues are:

1. The Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee produces the multi-year transportation authorization bills, such as ISTEA, TEA-21, or AIR-21, which "authorize" the expenditure of federal transportation funds for highways, transit, aviation, and rail.
2. The Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee is the money-related subcommittee (one of 13 on the House Appropriations Committee) that

produces the annual DOT spending bill. This yearly transportation act "appropriates" funds for the transportation programs and projects authorized by the T&I Committee.

## **The Senate - "The Great Deliberative Body"**

Contrasted with the House, the Senate has a dramatically different operating rhythm. Every election cycle, only one-third of the Senate is up for re-election, thereby providing an environment somewhat more insulated from the volatility of public opinion and popular political trends. Additionally, Senators naturally possess a statewide view versus the more parochial orientation of House members. Finally, with its arcane and elaborate rules of operation, the Senate tends to take longer to debate and consider legislation. The procedural weapon known as the filibuster (requiring 60 votes to close off debate or "invoke cloture") also serves to strengthen the power of the minority.

Within the Senate there are actually four main committees with some portion of jurisdiction for at least a piece of the transportation picture. They are:

1. The Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee with jurisdiction for highway transportation programs.
2. The Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee has primary jurisdiction for rail and aviation transportation issues.
3. The Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee is responsible for crafting legislation associated with transit activities.
4. The Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee has responsibilities similar to those of the House Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee. This money-allocating subcommittee funds the transportation programs authorized by the three committees listed above.

## **The Administration - The U.S. DOT and Its "Alphabet Soup of Agencies"**

Getting involved and staying involved with the transportation agencies of the Executive Branch or the Administration, though different from working with Congress, is also an important activity. Specifically, working with the U.S. Department of Transportation and the variety of modal administrations within it

- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), Federal Transit Administration (FTA), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) - can sometimes yield benefits. However, never lose sight of the fact that Congress will exercise its independence; seeking to set its own priorities and establish its own transportation policy directions.

### ***Key Plays***

- Legislative activity in Washington involves dealing more directly (and sometime exclusively) with staff members than Congressmen or Senators.
- Cultivate a good working relationship with staff members by really listening.
- Recognize the differences between the House, Senate & Administration.

## Being Prepared: Get Ready & Stay in the Game

"The absent are always wrong." -Machiavelli

To be considered a valued resource for your congressional delegation and other members of Congress, you have to become recognized as a solid and reliable source of information. Preparation is the key to successfully establishing this reputation and using it to build a strong relationship between your organization and the member. Yet, when representing a transportation organization (with an emphasis on detailed transportation plans and multi-year financial work programs), it is sometimes easy to become too organized and overly prepared. Sometimes a condition I call the "Jell-O Syndrome" can exist, that actually hampers the effectiveness of an advocacy effort. The Jell-O Syndrome is where motion is mistaken for progress. Don't allow pursuit of the "perfect" — but untimely — answer prevent you from providing folks in Washington with a "good" answer that's on time! Do the best you can, but be there when it counts. As the actor Michael J. Fox once said, "I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence I can reach for; perfection is God's business."

To establish a solid reputation with your member(s) in Washington, you'll need to be like an efficient and effective shortstop on a baseball team. When Cal Ripken took the field for the Baltimore Orioles, he had prepared himself physically and organized himself mentally. His greatest strength, however, was his willingness to simply "be there" at the ballpark on a remarkably consistent basis — ready to react and make the plays. Similarly, you need to "be there" for your member(s) consistently. If you're not in the Washington ball game, you'll never have the chance to make the plays! Being there means taking whatever time is needed to develop a relationship with those persons or groups your organization seeks to counsel through consistent and effective contact.

## Effective Communication

"An ounce of image is worth a pound of performance."  
- Peter's Placebo

Since most Capitol Hill staffers are not transportation professionals, your main task will be to translate the needs of your group from "transportation-ese" into "Congressional-ese." In other words, find a way to communicate your needs in ways that a member of Congress and his staff can understand. The best way to do this is to continually ask yourself three basic questions about any issue:

1. Why is this issue important to my area?
2. Why should this member care about it?
3. What exactly do I want this member to do about it?

If you can't answer these three questions in a clear, concise, and non-technical way, the odds are slim that you will successfully communicate with your target audience.

When dealing with a member of Congress, relate your message to the member's constituents or personal interests. A positive message is more easily digested, remembered, and adapted to the member's needs. Remember that you are working together for a common purpose: providing safe and reliable transportation for the public.

## Oral Communication

"Don't say anything you are not willing to see reduced to a six-word headline." -Ron Nessen

Though we live in a society where the explosion of written communication is unprecedented and astounding, oral communication still remains the primary method of choice for most of the Washington game. Working with members of Congress and their staffs — whether with individuals in a one-on-one setting or from a podium before an audience of hundreds — communication takes place verbally. Of course, reinforcing your oral message with written materials will always be vital, but you can read about that in the next section.

Once you have a clear understanding of an issue, the next step is to develop a solid and succinct message. The last step is to determine who will be the best spokesperson for that issue. Don't always assume that your organization's leader is the best choice. Sometimes another representative can be more effective in presenting your message and getting an audience with the right people in Washington, D.C. Also assess the personal, political and professional strengths of other leaders in your area as potential champions for particular transportation issues.

When you decide upon a spokesperson, make sure that he or she knows the subject inside and out. They may be asked questions about the issue and to offer alternatives for consideration. Remember, too, that members in Washington are regular people like yourself, so don't be intimidated. Have confidence and let your expertise speak for you.

Finally, when communicating orally, remember the dedication of the Civil War cemetery at Gettysburg. The keynote speaker, Edward Everett spoke for two hours and yet today no one remembers what he said. But Abraham Lincoln's brief comments, lasting only two minutes, will never be forgotten.

### **Written Communication**

"As the old philosopher once said, facts are nice  
but slogans sell beer." -John Ehrlichman

Most Congressional staffers (and members alike) need to have written materials that are:

1. brief,
2. accurate,
3. timely,
4. rooted in political reality, and
5. easily understood in terms of the action requested.

In most cases, a one-page issue brief (perhaps front and back) is really all a member's office will need or have time for. This one-page sheet should quickly

provide some background, the current status of the issue, and a clear indication of what action should be taken. On subjects that are expected to become ongoing areas of interest, a small 3 X 5-inch "palm card" can be extraordinarily useful. Members of Congress, staff, and even people from your own organization can carry around such a handy, pocket-sized summary of a particular transportation issue important to your area.

Additionally, don't overlook the desirability of packaging your message in such a way as to make it easily remembered. For example, characterizing your group's three primary policy recommendations in a format similar to "the 3 Rs" can prove beneficial. Instead of "reading, 'riting, & 'rithmetic," why not something like "raise, restructure & revise?" Many people can't recall more than a few basic points, so do all you can to help them by making those points memorable.

### **Personal Visits**

Your goal as a representative of your organization must be to make yourself, your group, your position, and your issues known to the member. To accomplish this goal, you should pay personal visits to appropriate members and their staffs both individually and collectively.

### **One-on-One**

One of the most effective ways to establish a strong working relationship with your member and their staff is to visit their office for face-to-face discussions on your issue. Your goal should be to not only inform the member's office on the issue of interest, but to establish a relationship with the staff, and if possible, the member as well. [Remember Callaway's Corollary: All Politics is Personal.] A major benefit of individual meetings is they afford staff members a non-threatening opportunity to ask those seemingly "dumb", but truly important questions they would not ask in a larger group setting.

When making a personal visit, follow these obvious tips, which are often too easily forgotten:

1. Call ahead; don't just "drop by."
2. Plan to be brief, but be ready to be flexible. Sometimes staff might indicate that they have time for a more detailed presentation of an issue, but your first assumption should always be that you'll need to be brief.

Make sure that your meetings with members are productive. The members are at least as busy as you are. It is best to make an appointment well in advance. Contact the appointments secretary or scheduler — or better yet, the transportation staffer with whom you've (hopefully) now established a relationship, explain the purpose of your visit, and set a firm date.

### **Larger Group Briefings**

In addition to the individual, one-on-one briefings discussed above, larger group briefings including staff from several offices can also be productive. Group settings are a more efficient use of your time and can help create a sense of common purpose, energy and momentum within the larger group. Therefore, it is important to deliver your message before this larger group with passion and purpose. A boring presentation, read from a script, devoid of passion and without apparent commitment has little chance of persuading anyone. Group settings are great opportunities, so make the most of them.

The best way to arrange such a large group meeting is to ask one of your members to sponsor or host the meeting. The member's staff can reserve a meeting room in Washington for you and invite colleagues to attend.

A well-orchestrated event will produce the best results by conveying a strong sense that your group knows what they want and understands how the game is played. Make sure the meeting is run efficiently to avoid wasting anyone's time. Limit the presentation to one or two key issues, keep the number of speakers to an absolute minimum, and make sure the meeting doesn't last more than one hour. Also be certain that any handout materials are attractive, concise and in sufficient quantity to provide copies to everyone. As with personal, one-on-one meetings, follow up with letters of thanks to all attendees, reiterating the main points of your presentation, and provide any requested information promptly.

## **Site Visits**

The importance of transportation is often overlooked because we take for granted the efficiency of our highway, transit, rail, and aviation systems. One of the best ways to remind members of Congress and their staffs about how complex the business of transportation can be is to show them your operations on a site visit. Let your member see firsthand how well their federal tax dollars are being spent. Give them the chance to enjoy the benefits of a particular transportation improvement, and they'll be much more inclined to continue to assist you in the future. Moreover, site visits provide the members with the anecdotal information so important and persuasive when they make their case on behalf of your project request.

Try to schedule visits when members are not in session in Washington, D.C. or when they are in their home districts. Generally these times, called "District Work Periods," are made public at the beginning of the Congressional session and can be accessed online from a variety of congressional websites. In particular, leadership offices — such as the "Whips" offices in the House or Senate — will post schedules on their respective web pages.

Finally, when planning a site visit don't overlook the "tourism" benefits your area might have to offer. A warm locale with golf or tennis facilities in plentiful supply makes a potential site visit even more attractive — especially in the winter. Don't hesitate to go with your area's strengths, whatever they might be.

### ***Key Plays***

- Get in the (transportation advocate) game.
- Don't mistake motion for progress.
- "Be there" consistently
- Like a professional shortstop — be ready to react and "make the play."
- Take the time to develop relationships with transportation staff.
- Translate from "transportation-ese" into "Congressional-ese."
- Don't say anything you are not willing to see reduced to a six-word headline.

- Don't let legislators and the setting in Washington intimidate you; be confident and let your expertise speak for you.
- Be brief, but make your message memorable (think Gettysburg speeches).
- Remember that "facts are nice, but slogans sell beer."
- Be flexible on visits, expect them to be brief, but be prepared if more time becomes available with staff.
- Timing and location of site visits can increase attendance.

## Keeping Your Eye on the Ball: Staying Informed

"I see it said that leaders should keep their ears to the ground. All I can say is that the British nation will find it very hard to look up to leaders who are detected in that somewhat ungainly posture." -Winston Churchill

Churchill's quote notwithstanding, it is imperative to keep abreast of events in Washington, D.C., in order to be effective in the representation of your group's interests. The information contained in each weekly edition of the AASHTO Journal (<http://www.transportation.org/publications/journal.nsf>) is essential reading for anyone involved in transportation issues at the federal level. Other publications, such as Roll Call (<http://www.rollcall.com>) and The Hill (<http://www.hillnews.com>), and newspapers serving the Washington, D.C. area, like the Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com>) and the Washington Times (<http://www.washtimes.com/index.htm>), are also useful in providing the political background for stories or issues important to your group. Finally, the act of simply keeping in frequent contact with transportation friends and colleagues in Washington can provide significant and often unanticipated benefits.

An effective congressional relationship — like any other relationship — is not the result of a one-time effort. To maintain a productive working interaction with members of Congress, you must stay involved and informed about what's happening in the legislative process in Washington, D.C.

### ***Key Plays***

- Stay informed of events in Washington by accessing websites for the AASHTO Journal, and other D.C.-based publications.
- Stay in contact with friends and colleagues in Washington to learn about current developments.
- Remember congressional relations is not a one-time effort.

## Concluding Comments: Bringing Home the Pennant

"Success is only a matter of opinion. Failure is a cold hard fact." -Peter Gent

The congressional legislative process can often seem ominous and threatening, but if you focus on providing useful and current information on the effects of transportation legislation in your area, you can play an important role on your organization's legislative team.

While a handbook of this sort can be helpful, you must understand that each effort to establish a working relationship with members of Congress and their staff will be different and uniquely based upon both the member and your organization's status and preferred approach. Timing, luck, and gut-level instincts all play crucial roles in the success or failure of any effort to make your presence known positively in Washington.

The ideas, tips, and guidelines provided in this playbook will undoubtedly prove beneficial. However, politics is not an exact science and there is no sure formula for certain and instant success. Yet, by adopting at least some of these methods, virtually every group can improve the effectiveness of its relationship with members of Congress and others involved with transportation at the federal level. So get in the game!

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## **Useful Federal-Related Websites**

USA Today's Guide to Government

<http://congress.nw.dc.us/usatoday/caphill.html>

United States Senate <http://www.senate.gov/>

U.S. House of Representatives (Leadership)

[http://www.house.gov/house/orgs\\_pub\\_hse\\_ldr\\_www.html](http://www.house.gov/house/orgs_pub_hse_ldr_www.html)

The White House <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

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