

Letter-Writing Campaigns: The Essential Grassroots Action

What is a letter writing campaign?

A letter writing campaign is an easy, effective advocacy tool by which a group of constituents voice their opinions about specific issues. The letters may be directed toward the president, a member of Congress, or a government agency. Knowing that reelection depends on the votes of their constituents, Senators and Representatives pay close attention to the mail they receive.

Why organize a letter writing campaign?

Legislators are there on Capitol Hill to represent us, the people. The letter serves to educate the target person/audience about an issue and explains why you feel they should act for/against that issue. Receiving a swarm of constituent mail can greatly impact the way a legislator votes on a issue. Letter writing campaigns are also a useful way to:

1. **Educate others on an issue** that will affect them. Through this process, citizens learn about events happening outside of their normal activity of daily living – events that will change enhanced public access and promote water quality into the next century.
2. **Get involved in political advocacy** by expressing your opinions to your legislators. You are not only participating in the democratic process, but also affecting the outcome.
3. **Carve out an identity for an issue, in this case the Rancocas Creek being nominated as a National Water Trail.** Stakeholders and Multi-Users of the Rancocas Creek Watershed are but one voice among many groups competing for legislative attention, time and resources. Letter writing is about direct advocacy and **Legislative Action**. Few folks out and about on the Rancocas thought about political advocacy before, during and after being in and about the Rancocas Creek. Letter writing advance local and other interest in support of legislative projects that highlight the unique benefit of multi-use on the Rancocas Creek and facilitate how multi-use carves out a niche for enhanced public access on the Rancocas Creek that promotes water quality.

Choose an Issue – Rancocas Creek being designated as a National Water Trail

- Select an issue that catches one's interest. See the American Canoe Association and other paddling groups as well as individual action issues on social media forums for ideas on what issues are currently hot.
- Try to follow these issues and any corresponding legislation closely in order to know when a bill will be voted on.
- Check the status of the bills at least twice a week to find out when a piece of legislation will go to committee or to the floor for a vote. When it does, you can intervene by holding your letter-writing campaign.

Here are some resources to help with tracking the legislation:

- [Thomas, The Library of Congress Web site](#), contains a database of all legislation proposed in the current Congress.
- The [House](#) and [Senate](#) home pages have both floor and committee schedules.
- **Interest groups and organizations** (for example, [Physicians for a National Health Program](#), [RESULTS](#), [Public Citizen](#), among others) are often the ones who follow bills most closely. Contact these groups and maintain a regular correspondence.
- **The local office of your senator or representative.** You are a constituent, and the staffers at your legislator's home office are more than eager to help you stay informed.

Hold the Event

Letter-writing campaigns are most effective when you get together with everyone in a room and have them write the letters on the spot. This though is trumped by exploiting and leveraging social media to the hilt. If you want people to hand write a note, consider using creative and recognizable cards. For example, a holiday card with a piece of coal for a letter on protecting Clean Water Act funding, "Don't put coal on the Clean Water Act for Christmas.

One strategy you can use to get people involved is to schedule a speaker on the topic and hold the letter writing just after the session (email-ingvarja@verizon.net) to help with scheduling speakers/webinars!). Another strategy would be to position yourself in a busy area, perhaps outside of a common area around the time that area is heavily visited and have citizens stop to sign postcards and make calls on the spot as they pass by.

Pointers for Letters to you Senator

1. Identify the legislation you are writing about according to its House bill number (e.g., H. XXXX) and/or the Senate bill number (S. 952). This way, they know exactly what you're talking about. For the Rancocas Creek mention you support the Rancocas Creek being designated as a National Water Trail
2. Include information that supports your position and how the proposed legislation or issue affects you **personally**. Anecdotal evidence is the most effective and persuasive lobbying tool.
3. Offer your expertise if it is relevant. Believe it or not, as a paddler and or multi-use person on the Rancocas Creek you may have experiential or trained expertise that may be useful to legislators.
4. Use simple language (within reason). Staff workers in Congressional offices are not experts on all issues. An example: the term "local kayaker" may be more understandable than "nephrologist."
5. Always **ask** the senator or representative for something. This can be support of a certain bill, co-sponsorship of a bill, or you may want the legislator to introduce legislation.

6. Always thank the senator or representative for something. You can thank them for their time, their effort or for their support of legislation.

7. Include your name and address so that you may receive a response.

8. If you have time, consider writing a longer personal business style letter. Personal letters are much more effective lobbying efforts than postcards, petitions or even phone calls because they show more effort!

9. Consider having people make phone calls! These are also very important lobbying tools and do not take much time.

SAMPLE BUSINESS SYTLE LETTER

Chris McCoy
1902 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191

The Honorable John Warner
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Warner:

As a constituent and a paddler of the Rancocas Creek I want to express my support for designating New Jersey's Rancocas Creek as a National Water Trail

NJ's Rancocas Creek is found spread through the 360 square mile Rancocas Creek Watershed. Heritage runs deep. Prior to the first European settlers on the Rancocas in and around 1613, native American made the creek and her lands home. Following colonization, industrialization harvested the power of the Rancocas Creek tides and non-tidal waters. Recreation is documented going back to the mid 1800's, the Rancocas Creek Water Trail was mapped in 1941. Today running from the NJ Pine Barrens National Reserve, passing through 33 different municipalities, numerous State, County and Municipal Parks the Rancocas is widely enjoyed year round.

I am involved w the Rancocas Creek because (*provide your own story*)...

The effort to gain National Water Trail designation is widely supported by locals and visitors alike. Benefits are found that improve public health, enhance public access, promote water quality, is a year driver for tourism, Recreation Opportunities: The water trail route has established public access points that accommodate a diversity of trip lengths and provide access to a variety of opportunities for recreation and education.

- Education: Water trail users are provided with opportunities to learn about the value of water resources, cultural heritage, boating skills, and outdoor ethics through various private, public, governmental and non-governmental non-profit agencies
- Conservation: The water trail provides opportunities for communities to develop and implement strategies that enhance and restore the health of local waterways and surrounding lands. Mount Holly's environmental committee attests to local as local should be staking ownership to restoring the Rancocas Creek.
- Community Support: Local communities provide support and advocacy for maintenance and stewardship of the water trail.
- Public Information: The public is provided with accessible and understandable water trail information, including details for identifying access and trail routes; cultural, historic, and natural features; hazards; and water quality. The water trail is promoted to the community and broad national audience.
- Trail Maintenance: Community clean-ups and Adopt a Creek events demonstrate the ability of volunteers to support routine and long-term maintenance investments on the water trail.
- Planning: Maintain a water trail plan that describes a vision, desired future conditions, and strategies to strengthen best management practices.

Please contact me for more information on the topic of gaining National Water Trail designation for NJ's Rancocas Creek. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely

Blind Lemon Jefferson