



Advocacy Toolkit

Farmers Market Coalition / July 2016

You're the expert!

Democracy works best when lawmakers understand how policies are working for people in the communities they serve. As market managers, vendors, shoppers and supporters, you have valuable knowledge to share. Elected officials need to hear from you—the experts—in order to make the best decisions. There's no need to have a specific 'ask' of your elected officials in order to reach out to them. Start building a relationship with your elected officials by sharing what your market is up to, the impact it's having on the community, and some challenges it's facing. Invite officials to visit your market, and regularly share press coverage and event notices with them. When the time comes for policy decisions to be made, your elected officials will have a basic understanding of your market's work, and will know they can contact you with any questions.



Photo: USDA

The number of farmers markets in America continues to grow, and there are important policy improvements to be made. Now's the time to reach out to your elected officials. It's important, it's easy, and it's a great opportunity to brag about your market.

Contents

3 Advocacy v. Lobbying

Can you lobby? Yes, you (probably) can!

4 Building Relationships

Five easy steps to building productive relationships with your elected officials.

6 Resources to Download

Templates, Talking Points, Social Media Cheat Sheets and more.

6 Useful Links

Links to use to help identify and contact your elected officials.

7 Who's Who

What's the difference between a Senator and a Congressman? Or an administrative versus an elected official? All of your burning questions answered here.

8 Legislation & Regulation

A brief description of legislation, and the rules that regulate it.

Advocacy vs. Lobbying

First thing's first: what's the difference between general advocacy and lobbying?

Advocacy: Explaining and promoting an idea, cause, or organization. For example, stating, “Farmers markets help keep money in the local economy.”

Lobbying: Supporting a specific position on a piece of federal, state or local legislation. For example, stating, “I encourage you to vote in favor of Senate Bill 23.”

Farmers markets with tax-exempt status are often under the misconception that they cannot be active in the political arena. In reality, most federal nonprofits—excluding churches and private foundations—with 501(c)(3) status are allowed to participate in lobbying activities, as long as they don't represent a “substantial” part of the nonprofit's activities. The IRS offers more information on how they define “substantial” [on their website](#), but for most markets, a “substantial” amount translates to more than 20% of the market's activities (based on expenditures). So, there's no need to shy away from lobbying if you're monitoring how many hours and dollars are spent on the efforts.

Moreover, **non-profits can provide educational information to elected officials at any point.** For example, if your market received a grant, it is not considered lobbying to let policymakers know about the activities that grant supported or the impacts that the grant-funded work had on your community. Additionally, it is not considered lobbying to provide feedback or recommendations to a government agency (such as the USDA) or administrative official tasked with implementing legislation that has already been passed.

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Photo: FRESHFARM Markets

Building Relationships

Elected officials at all levels of government need to know what's going on in the communities they serve—especially at popular meeting spaces like farmers markets. You know how policies made at the local, state, and national levels affect your markets but many officials don't—but they are interested and willing to learn.

Getting to know the people in government for your area is a crucial first step in achieving policies that will support your market. Elected officials want to meet their constituents, especially when they represent businesses or community organizations like farmers markets. You don't need to live in the state capitol or Washington, DC to meet with your Representative or Senator; they all have offices in their home districts or around the state.

Find out when you elected officials are back in town and schedule a meeting.

[2016 House Calendar](#)

[2016 Senate Calendar](#)

1. Identify Who, When and Where

Local officials (county commissioners, mayors, and city councilmembers) are usually easy to find with a quick Google search. Find out who represents you (and your market) in your federal legislators [by entering your address into this website](#), and [your state legislators by using this website](#). Spend some time learning about your elected officials before reaching out. Elected officials draw on their experiences while making decisions—it can be helpful to be familiar with their backgrounds and past positions. The House and Senate each post calendars of when they're working in D.C., so use the calendars to see when your Representative or Senator has a good chance of being back home in their district.

You can choose to set up a meeting at the office of the elected official, or better yet, invite your city councilmembers, county commissioners, mayor, state representatives, and members of Congress **to visit the market**.

National Farmers Market Week offers an excellent opportunity to invite your elected officials to the market. The Secretary of Agriculture [proclaims](#) the first full week of August National Farmers Market Week every year, in order to highlight the role that farmers markets play in developing local and regional food systems that support the sustainability of family farms, revitalize rural communities, and provide opportunities for farmers and consumers to interact. Many members of Congress are back home in their districts in August, making it an ideal time to schedule an event and invite a legislator to come and see first-hand the positive economic and social impacts on members of your community.

Alternatively, elected officials often host town hall meetings when they're home in their districts. These are also excellent opportunities to introduce yourself and share information about your market and the public policies that affect it.

2. Set up a Meeting

Call or email to schedule a meeting with your elected official. Use [FMC's Elected Official Invitation Template](#) to tell your elected officials about your National Farmers Market Week plans, and to invite them to participate. Most elected officials have easily searchable contact information on their websites. When reaching out, be prepared to explain what you would like to discuss. You may be referred to an aide who handles agriculture issues. Don't be disappointed! These are the people who advise their bosses and they can be very influential.

Additionally, aides can be helpful by providing background on the official, explaining what their priorities are, and letting you know what they are most interested in learning about. If this is a first meeting you can explain the market, invite them to visit and ask if and when the official might like to come by.

3. Promote the Visit

If an elected official is coming to an event at your market, be sure to spread the word. Tell your customers and vendors using your usual communication methods: emails, newsletters, the market's website, and social media. Officials love positive media attention, so consider sending a press release to local newspapers and television stations, so they're able to cover the visit. Use [FMC's Press Release Template](#) to get you started.

4. Show off

When at your meeting or visit, succinctly and clearly explain how the market operates, its successes and the challenges it faces. **Be confident**—you are the expert on how an issue or program affects their constituency. **Be appreciative** of any support they have given in the past. **Be respectful** of demands on their time and do not expect more than 15 minutes if you are meeting with an elected official, or 30 minutes with an aide. **Bring a handout** with your main points and leave it with them in case you don't get to cover all the issues. **Have data on hand:** Equip yourself with basic information like the number of farmers in your market, markets in the area, market, number of SNAP, WIC, and/or Senior customers served, and total market sales, as well as any other relevant statistics. Use [FMC's Talking Points](#) document to help tell your market's story.

Keep in mind that from an elected official's or aide's perspective you are the expert. They want to help, but most of them are unfamiliar with the challenges that your market faces. Don't be intimidated. Remember that politicians had other jobs before they were elected, but they probably were not farmers market managers. Nevertheless, they are expected to pass good laws that affect markets in their districts—they need to know how to do that.

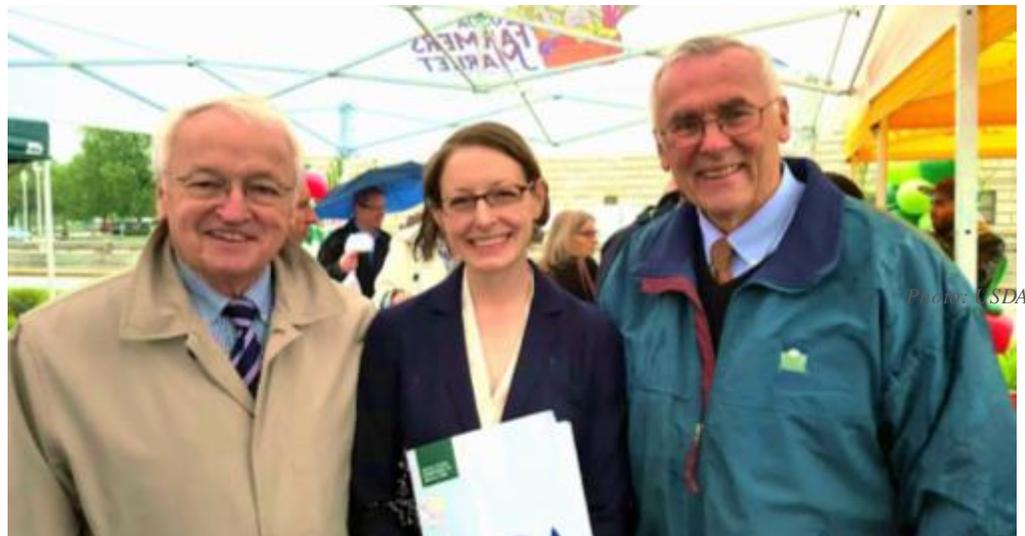


Photo: USDA

5. Follow up

Send a short thank-you note or e-mail after each meeting or event and offer yourself as an informational resource.

Keep in touch! After you introduce yourself and your organization, act as a resource by providing updates on your organization's activities and successes. Get into the habit of thanking your public officials for their efforts, when relevant, in personal letters, in newsletters articles, and letters to the editor. Make sure to highlight these articles on your organization's emails, and forward them to the appropriate staff. Add key Congressional staff to your newsletter, press, and event invitation lists but *not* to any fundraising solicitation lists. The goal is to maintain regular communication with them, but not overwhelm them.

Most elected officials have public social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), so look them up and be sure to follow them. A public 'thank you for the visit' through these outlets is appreciated by the officials, and helps publicize your market. Who doesn't like getting a shoutout on Facebook? Check out [FMC's Social Media Cheat Sheet](#) for tips and posting ideas.

Remember to invite your elected officials to future events, celebrations, or meetings in the community.

Resources to Download

[FMC Legislative Visit Invitation Template](#)

[FMC Press Release Template](#)

[National Farmers Market Week Proclamation](#)

[FMC Social Media Cheat Sheet](#)

[FMC Talking Points](#)

Useful Links

[Find Your Federal Elected Officials](#)

[Find Your State Elected Officials](#)

[U.S. Senate Calendar](#)

[U.S. House Calendar](#)

Who's Who

Elected & Administrative Officials

Elected officials are public servants who stand for elections. Broadly speaking, elected officials are responsible for writing, passing, and implementing laws or regulations.

Elected officials usually give the responsibility and guidance needed to implement laws to administrative officials. Administrative officials staff agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), state health departments, as well as city and county offices.

Administrative officials are not elected, but are instead appointed by elected officials or are career civil servants.

Federal Elected Officials

Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives (collectively known as Congress) write laws that address issues that are national in scope, including the programs administered by the USDA, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP), crop insurance, and the National Organics Program. Every five years Congress writes a "Farm Bill," which provides instructions, funding, and vision to guide the USDA for the next five years. The most recent Farm Bill was passed by Congress in 2014 and will expire in 2018, however, Congress will begin discussing the next Farm Bill in 2017.

U.S. Senate

The 50 states elect 2 senators each for staggered 6-year terms. A senator represents between 1 and 37 million people, depending on their state's population. You should address members of the U.S. Senate as 'Senator {insert last name}.' In formal correspondence, you should address them as 'Honorable {first and last name}.'

U.S. House of Representatives

The U.S. divided into 435 congressional districts with a population of about 710,000 each. Each district elects a representative to the House of Representatives for a 2-year term. You should address members of the U.S. House of Representatives as 'Congressman {insert last name},' or 'Congresswoman {insert last name}.' In formal correspondence, you should address them as 'Honorable {first and last name}.'

Address members of the Senate as 'Senator' and members of the House as 'Congressman or Congresswoman'

State Elected Officials

Every state is different, but the basic structure of state government usually mirrors that of the federal government with an upper house (usually called the State Senate) and a lower house (usually called either the State Legislature or Assembly). America's Constitution, gives states significant power to adjust taxation, regulate health and safety (including "cottage food" and other food safety laws), and create (or end) state programs that affect farmers markets, including state farmers market certification, nutrition incentives, and general agricultural marketing and assistance.

The composition, titles, terms, and number of state legislators varies from state to state, but it's a good idea to follow the same professional courtesies you would with federal elected officials. State Senators, Representatives, or Assembly members should be addressed as Representative, Senator or Assemblywoman/man in verbal communications and as "Honorable" in written correspondence.

Local Elected Officials

As the saying goes, "all politics is local." In many cases your most responsive and effective allies will be elected officials at the city, town, and county levels. Most towns and cities have a mayor as well as a small number of elected officials, usually including city council members or aldermen. As is the case with state elected officials, municipal officials have considerable say in what happens within their jurisdiction. Local elected officials should be your first point of contact for issues such as zoning, transportation, and city health programs.

Counties (which may be home to multiple towns but usually not more than one city) handle issues that fall in between towns/cities and states. Two issues that counties usually play an active role in are the collection of taxes and the implementation of health and safety regulations. While local governments come in all shapes and sizes, most counties have county commissioners or a tax assessor. If you have a question about which department or office within local government handles a certain issue, don't be afraid to ask. Elected officials are public servants, and public servants' number one job is to be there for their constituents.

Legislation & Regulation

Legislation: Legislation is the way to practically achieve a policy goal. Legislation is written by elected officials with the input of constituents (like you), debated, and either accepted or rejected by elected officials. If it is accepted, legislation becomes law and is established public policy. If it is rejected, legislation can be reintroduced, edited, or shelved depending on whether the legislation's supporters believe that they can succeed in the future.

Rules & Regulations: Rules and regulations are written by government agencies to implement legislation passed by Congress. For example, the Food Safety Modernization Act was passed by Congress, and then the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was tasked with creating the set of rules that would need to be followed in order for proper implementation of the Act. As new rules are created, the general public is invited to provide feedback on drafts through formal public comment periods. These drafts and public comment periods can be found through the Federal Register: <http://www.federalregister.gov/>.

References:

IRS Website, *Lobbying*. <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/lobbying>. Retrieved July 2016.

IRS Website, *Measuring Lobbying Activity: Expenditure Test*. <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/measuring-lobbying-activity-expenditure-test>. Retrieved July, 2016.