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# Playing Politics

## *3 Political skills you must master*

**F**or many emergency managers, politics are anathema. We believe that our focus should be solely on our work and that the compromises involved in politics should not affect our ability to deliver services to those who need them. Politics is seen as something vaguely dirty and distasteful and has nothing to do with emergency management.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The simple fact is that much of what we do, from the authorities we use to the budgets that fund our programs, is rooted in politics. To be truly successful, you have to understand how the political process works and how to influence it.

### **Why Play Politics?**

In a paper titled *The Politics of Disaster: Principles for Local Emergency Managers and Elected Officials*, Mike Selves, past President of the International Association of Emergency Managers, offered 3 reasons why emergency managers need to be involved in politics:

1. We need the emergency authorities that only the political system can provide
2. We need the assistance that elected officials can expedite

3. We need the public support that politicians can provide us.

Add to this the requirements in the Emergency Management Accreditation Program for a process to identify and address proposed legislative and regulatory changes and one can make a strong case that being involved in politics is an essential part of a public emergency manager's job.

### **Understand the Political Process**

To be able to influence legislation, one needs to understand how legislation is crafted. And not just who takes the final vote but the process itself from beginning to end.

The process can be convoluted. There's usually a requirement for review for form by the municipal attorney but after that there are can be many people involved in reviewing, depending on the type of legislation. For example, in my own city of San Francisco, a resolution to accept and expend a Federal grant is reviewed by the Ethics Committee, and the Office of Labor Standards Enforcement and must be approved by the Mayor and the Controller. Failing any one of these reviews or approvals could derail the grant request.

The political process provides for public input, normally done through a committee hearing. Proposed legislation is reviewed and then assigned to an appropriate committee for public comment and review by the committee members. If your legislation is not approved by the committee or does not enjoy public support, it never makes it to a final vote by the full legislative body. Knowing when your legislation is slated for a committee hearing and marshalling public support for it at the hearing is essential to its success.

Why do you need to know this process? If your legislation is important, you need to be educating the decision makers before they vote. This means knowing at what point in the process you can bring influence to bear. For example, you need to spend time with committee members before a hearing and with the rest of the legislative representatives before a final vote. This is not “influencing peddling” but providing information that legislators need to make good decisions. It’s an important and accepted part of the legislative process.

## Influence Legislation

As experts in our field, we are often called upon to comment on legislation. It’s one thing to provide an opinion on local legislation. This is to be expected. It’s quite another to express an opinion on state and national legislation.

Simply writing a letter to a politician on proposed legislation is worthwhile but it doesn’t carry the same clout as an official position supported or opposed by your jurisdiction.

There may also be administrative rules that prohibit your expressing an opinion in your official capacity. Jurisdictions usually have a process for deciding whether to support or oppose proposed legislation. This may involve your providing information to a committee that

makes a recommendation to the chief elected official.

Like most political processes, getting an official position on legislation can be a bit convoluted. The reward, however, is worth it. An official position carries clout and, in the case of larger jurisdictions, may give you access to an official lobbyist for your jurisdiction at state and federal levels.

## Build a Constituency

One of the drawbacks of emergency management is that it is a relatively small discipline with few members. A large membership translates to votes which equate to political clout. Without this clout, emergency managers are at a political disadvantage.

The answer is treat political issues the same way we deal with crisis: by building consensus among organizations that share our interests. For example, citizens involved in volunteer programs such as Community Emergency Response Teams form a potential constituency to support positions on disaster preparedness. In San Francisco, I worked closely with our Department of the Environment on issues of sustainability for power and water.

This consensus building extends to local politicians as well. In trying to pass legislation in response to a series of hotel fires, our task force found an ally in a young politician who was looking for a cause to promote. His support allowed us to pass an ordinance that helped mitigate the causes of the fires.

Former San Francisco Mayor Willie L. Brown, Jr. said it best in his autobiography, [Basic Brown](#), “No matter how righteous your cause, you’ve got to do the political heavy lifting to secure the consensus you need to get anything done in the actual political arena...” Like it or not, playing politics is a skill emergency managers must master. 