

By Joel Pannell

Spring into Advocacy Action

AS THE FLOWERS COME TO FULL BLOOM, now is the perfect time to spring into action with advocacy plans for the coming months. NRPA's recent Legislative Forum was a tremendous success: Nearly 300 advocates from around the country came to Washington, D.C., to lobby their Members of Congress for increased federal resources for state and local parks and recreation. In doing so, they made the case for the critical role that our field plays in addressing national issues such as health and wellness, job creation and economic competitiveness, transportation, and conservation.

Now that Legislative Forum is over, NRPA members are planning for continuing advocacy at home. With July serving as "Parks and Recreation Month," it is the perfect time to begin putting together events that can serve as tremendous advocacy opportunities.

This year's Park and Recreation Month theme is "Get Wild." NRPA members are encouraged to use their imaginations in developing creative and engaging events that highlight the impact parks and recreation makes in their communities. These events serve as ideal occasions to invite both local and federally elected officials. The U.S. Congress will still be in session in July, so federal legislators will spend the bulk of the month in D.C.; however, many legislators spend long weekends at home. Do not underestimate the importance of inviting staff from your Congressmen's or Senator's district and local offices. Building relationships with staff is a critical part of a successful advocacy strategy.

August provides another excellent advocacy opportunity. The U.S. Congress is annually in recess as legislators return to their home states and districts to reconnect with their constituents and reassess their priorities and policy positions. Make the most of this time by inviting Members of Congress to tour your parks, facilities, and programs. This is your chance to demonstrate how your agency is leveraging federal resources—whether it's a campground that has become more accessible through LWCF funds, a senior center or playground that was repaired with CDBG

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money, a network of trails supported by federal transportation dollars, or a community health program made possible by a federal grant.

Four components that make a site worth your legislator's time: people, place, press, and recognition. If your planned site visit has a strong component of each, there is a greater likelihood that your legislator will attend.

People

Combining the site visit with an event that can draw a crowd makes it more attractive to the legislator and his or her staff, since each person in attendance represents a potential vote in the next election.

If you do not have a planned event (community concert or festival) that you can invite your legislator to attend, then offer a tour of your facility. Schedule the tour for a time of day when attendance is high and multiple programs are taking place. Designate one or two individuals

to meet and escort the legislator when he or she arrives.

Place

Remember that the main purpose of the site visit or event is to advance federal law as it relates to issues that impact your community. Advocates can contact NRPA's public policy team for information on their members of Congress (such as which committees they sit on and which key issue areas they have been active in).

In determining a site, always relate it to the legislative priority you want to push.

Keep it short (15-30 minutes), and develop talking points in advance to deliver during the tour.

Choose a time when there is a lot of activity taking place. Remember to consider weather (umbrellas or shelters)—and plan food around the legislator's convenience.

Press

Creating an environment that is engaging

to local media will go a long way toward attracting legislators.

The message to the press must be more than, "Congressman Smith might visit our recreation center." It should be something like this: "We are having an Outdoor Fair and Fitness Expo, and we are demonstrating all the health promotion programs our agency offers. We will have face painting, water balloon tosses, and youth performances—and Congressman Smith has been invited to attend."

Take photographs at your event, and present them to your legislator at your next meeting. Finally, use social media to your advantage. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets are great ways to get messaging out at little or no cost.

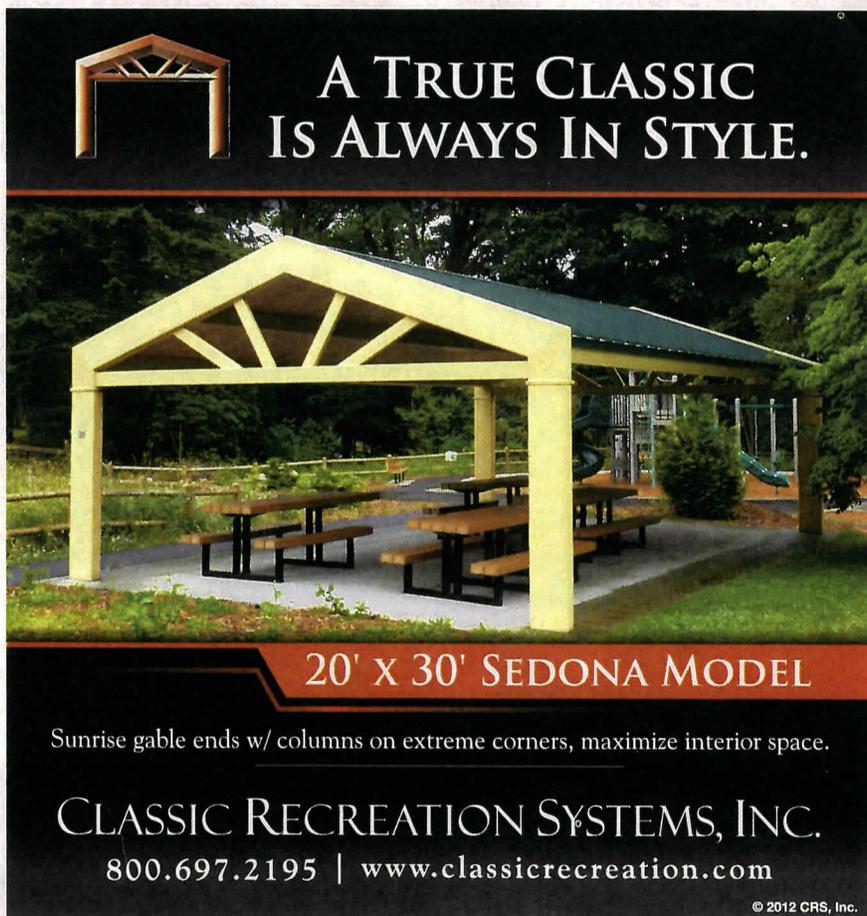
Recognition

Recognition can come in the form of awards, ribbon-cutting, a certificate of appreciation, or simply mentioning the legislator's "longstanding commitment to building better communities." Tying recognition to a recent piece of legislation will also make legislators more likely to attend.

Once you have the event planned and have begun the process of preparing, call your legislator's office and make sure to contact the staff that handles the issue on which you are trying to educate the legislator (Land and Water Conservation Fund State Assistance Program, transportation programs, etc.) Explain your interest in the issue to staff, and tell members about the substance of the event and the connection to the legislator. Ask the staff if they think your legislator would be interested in attending and receiving the particular type of recognition you have planned. Provide a chance for the legislator to address his or her constituents. Ask the staffer about the proper way to submit invitations to the scheduler, and request that the staffer make sure the invitation is considered. Ask when a good time to follow up would be, and do so appropriately.

This year Congress will be in recess from August 6th to September 7th. ☀

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