

Getting Organized to Advocate for Smart Communities



Gregor Beck

Chapter 4 shows numerous ways in which smart-growth advocates can participate in smart government decision-making. Smart-growth supporters do not have to wait for a formal planning process such as a five-year review of a municipal official plan to take place. Your community group may wish to take a more proactive approach in tackling sprawl and advocating smart growth in your city or town. For that reason, you will need to have informal strategies in your advocacy toolbox as well. These include self-organizing techniques, pre-hearing consultations, working with the media, and advocacy.

What is advocacy? To advocate for smarter communities simply means to speak or write in support of them. It means spreading the word about the many creative ways of moving towards a smarter future for Ontario's nature and Ontario's communities. It means forging alliances with sectors of your local community who will benefit from smarter land-use planning (which is just about everybody!). It also means understanding and speaking the language of those you are working with. Perhaps a municipal councillor you are trying to convince to support your point of view is not all that interested in protecting natural areas in their own right. But trying talking in dollar terms about the heightened property values for homes near natural areas, and you may get a more positive reaction! Be sure you clearly and positively define what it is that you want. Whenever we are writing or making presentations on urban sprawl and smart growth, we must always make sure we answer one question before others ask it of us: *If this is what we are against, what are we for?* We may oppose urban sprawl, but we *support* smart, environmentally sustainable communities.

Effective advocacy demands a certain level of organizational capacity and skill. As many community groups throughout Ontario are learning, good organization is critical to any successful advocacy effort. This chapter focuses on the steps that community groups can take to improve their level of organization and their advocacy skills.

Why Should the Public Get Involved in Planning for Smart Growth?

- Our system of government gives us the right to have a voice in all matters of public policy. Some laws (such as Ontario's *Planning Act*) specifically require that we have that opportunity.
- The public can provide the information needed to develop, maintain and carry out an effective smart-growth plan. Professional planners and local officials need comments and ideas from those who know the community best – the people who live and work there.
- Public involvement creates an informed community, which in turn leads to better planning.
- Members of the community feel a sense of ownership of smart-growth plans. Cooperation between residents and their government leads to fewer conflicts.
- Public involvement is an important means of enforcing planning laws. Having the community informed about smart growth and giving the community access to planning for smart growth ensures that the laws are applied properly.

GETTING ORGANIZED

1. **Establish a Community Group or Coalition:** Often, individuals contact Ontario Nature wondering what they can do about sprawl in their community. The answer Ontario Nature generally gives is this: “Build community support, and get organized!” On their own, individuals are not nearly as effective in being heard by governments as are organized groups. In addition, as you will see from the tips below, effective advocacy is hard work, so you’ll need all the help you can get! You may want to either start a new smart-growth action committee, or else join an existing environmental, ratepayer or other group in your community.

Visit the “Nature Network” section of Ontario Nature’s website at www.ontarionature.org to find out about our network of over 135 member groups throughout Ontario. For further information you may need about a particular group, e-mail info@ontarionature.org.

To get others interested in your group’s smart-growth work, put up notices in popular public gathering places around your community (libraries, community centres, churches, supermarkets), post free public-service announcements (PSAs) in your local newspaper, and talk, talk, talk with everyone you can. Network with as many people as possible, and encourage them to get involved and to spread the word. Family, friends and neighbours are all potential supporters. Public information meetings and educational materials are excellent ways to build your membership and to get the word out. Community organizing takes a lot of effort sustained over a long time to yield results, so be prepared to go the distance. Your enthusiasm, commitment and good humour will go far towards sustaining your energy and that of your group.

Smart-growth supporters also need to build alliances with those affected by uncontrolled sprawl. Since sprawl hurts us all, community groups can achieve far greater success when they unite their energies and resources in a common interest. In the United States, smart-growth coalitions have brought together conservationists, farmers, planners, urban developers, social advocates, neighbourhood associations and others. So once you have your own group fairly well organized, look around your community – and beyond – for new allies. They could be farmers’ federations, ratepayers’ associations or heritage preservation committees. Demonstrating widespread support for your initiatives enhances your credibility and profile, and allows you to coordinate communications and activities amongst member groups. A coalition can also acquire the expertise needed to address the many technical issues that arise in the land-use planning process.

Dialogue with Developers

It’s important for smart-community groups and developers to sit down together and find out about each others’ interests and priorities. Here are some words around which your conversation can progress:

- Balance
- Heritage
- Community
- Neighbourhood
- Greenspace
- Productive farmland

2. **Develop Clear Goals, Strategies and Tactics:** To be an effective voice for smart growth in your community, everyone in your group should have a clear understanding of your common goals. Are you opposing a particular development, endorsing another development, or promoting a long-term vision of social and environmental sustainability for your community? Do you plan to be involved for a few months or for a year or two (or more, if need be)? Are you interested in working within the planning system or outside of it, or both?

Developing a game plan and mutually agreed-upon strategies are the first steps in getting organized. Many groups choose to draw up a mission statement that defines their reason for being and some goals for the short, medium and long term, along with proposed activities. Once you’ve completed your game plan, review it from the end (activities) right back to your beginning (mission statement) to ensure there is a clear and logical chain of thought leading to action.

3. **Clearly Outline Roles and Responsibilities:** Many community groups find it productive to divide up tasks amongst their members according to skills and interests. A person with good writing skills can prepare your mission statement, write news releases and draft brochures. You may have a planner or lawyer in the group who can help you with planning documents, hearings and other processes. Members with strong computer skills can help prepare attractive documents and design and manage your website.

It is essential to assign one or two spokespersons for your group who will act as consistent public and media liaison people (see Working with the Media, below). Your group may also want to develop a code of conduct that formally outlines roles and responsibilities, decision-making mechanisms (consensus, voting), and procedures for recording and monitoring decisions. Setting an

agenda and assigning minute-takers for group meetings are also highly recommended.

4. **Build Your Skills and Material Resources:** To accomplish its goals, every community group needs resources – paper supplies, computers, fax machine, photocopier, etc. Some may be found amongst your group members (and their families), but others will have to be found elsewhere. Assess your needs versus your existing resources, then plan to fill in the gaps. Will you have to do some fundraising? If so, then who are your likely funders? How will you approach them? What will they want in return? Do you have fundraising skills amongst your group members or will they require training? Are your media spokespeople sufficiently prepared, or is training necessary? Outline your needs and develop a plan to meet them.
5. **Expand Your Knowledge:** As a community advocacy group, your greatest tool is your credibility. As local residents volunteering your time to promote smart planning in your community, your integrity is critical to your success. The quickest way to lose credibility with government, the media and your community is by getting your facts wrong. Therefore, it is essential that your group – and particularly your spokesperson – has a firm grasp of the issues and can provide reliable statistical, scientific or other information in support of your position. Your group may wish to brainstorm around questions you may still have, or data that are still lacking, and then assign qualified group members as researchers.

This guide will equip you with much of the information you need. However, there is always a need for more investigation. Talk to municipal planners and engineers, your municipal councillors, and the appropriate provincial officials, as well as your local conservation authority, your local environmental advisory committee, and your local naturalist club. Smart-growth supporters often find themselves becoming very knowledgeable on everything from roadway design to official plan amendments. Be prepared to embark on a major learning curve!

To contact Ontario government ministries, call (416) 326-1234 or visit www.gov.on.ca/mbs/english/index.html.

6. **Identify Supporters and Opponents:** As part of your brainstorming sessions, ask yourselves: Who supports smart growth in your community? Who do you need to support your goals? Are there local developers planning to build smarter developments? Who are the decision-makers on your specific smart-growth issue? What are their main concerns? Who and what influences them?

What does your opposition look like? What are their main concerns and arguments? Knowing the playing field will vastly improve your chances of success.

Using a Cooperative Approach: The Belfountain Experience

The Belfountain community (within the Town of Caledon, Peel Region) has developed a successful, non-confrontational, cooperative approach in working with a developer. This developer had previously planned a residential subdivision in the hamlet that would have had potentially disastrous impacts on the community, both environmentally and culturally.

After several years of confrontation, the residents decided that a proactive, cooperative approach to the development would benefit both the developer and the community. The result can be seen in the innovative plan of subdivision that has on it the names of both Enterac (the developer) and the Belfountain Community Planning Organization (the residents).

Enterac and the BCPO have worked together to mutual benefit. They have shared the same objectives – to protect the residents' water resources and to integrate a new subdivision into an existing, historically significant and environmentally sensitive hamlet. These objectives will be achieved with as little negative impact as possible, and, in some respects, with benefits to the community.

– from *Protecting the Niagara Escarpment: A Citizen's Guide*, Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment, Toronto, 1998. Reprinted with permission.

(2005 update: The BCPO and Enterac continue to work cooperatively in trying to plan this subdivision. It would cluster the homes in part of the property and would need to leave substantial greenspace undeveloped.)

ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY TOOLS

There are many effective mechanisms for public input on community issues.

Pre-Hearing Consultations

In the case of a dispute that appears headed to a public hearing, such as a hearing before the Ontario Municipal Board, some municipalities may encourage developers to consult with community groups in an effort to resolve conflicts. This can be an effective alternative to expensive and

lengthy hearings, provided that both sides are open to dialogue. In certain cases, such consultations have resulted in significant changes to development plans, to bring them more in line with community wishes. Often this works to the developers' advantage as well – they save time and money, and win community support for their project.

Design Charrettes

Charrettes are workshops that bring people together to solve complex planning issues of social and civic importance in a short time. They are generally led by architectural, planning and landscape professionals and involve interested members of the public. A successful charrette provides an opportunity for people to meet in an informal, friendly atmosphere to discuss local issues and craft workable solutions.

There are two main types of charrettes:

Visioning Charrette: Professional designers, aided by technical experts, students and residents groups, draw up what a community would look like if it conformed to public policy goals. Product: Lots of great drawings, but no direct implementation.

Implementation Charrette: Planning and other experts work cooperatively with interested members the public. Professional designers facilitate. Product: Lots of rough drawings with a commitment to implement.

Principles for a Successful Charrette

- Allow sufficient time to complete the process (4-8 days).
- Use professional facilitators.
- Build confidence in the process and the policies that arise from it.
- Involve all relevant people, agencies and organizations (including affected community groups) early in the process.
- Access necessary technical expertise, including that of municipal staff.
- Share information equally.
- Deal with issues efficiently.
- Promote benefits of collaboration.
- Build in implementation strategies.

Community Mapping

Community mapping is a versatile and flexible tool for community-based planning and development work. Benefits include:

- public involvement and empowerment in planning

- strengthened sense of place and community
- clearer picture of local assets.

At its simplest, community mapping requires a marker, a sheet of paper, and a group of residents interested in shaping the future of their community. The purpose is to visually represent your community, its natural areas and its civic amenities, and to provide an overall picture of the area. One person is designated as designer/drawer and another as a facilitator to ensure everyone has a fair chance at input. Together, the group maps out the current state of your community, and then envisions and designs what the future community should look like. A good map can help your group to get a better “lay of the land,” agree on your group’s goals, help communicate your message to the media and public, and help make presentations to your municipal council.

Rather than responding to a particular development proposal, community members can take matters into their own hands, engage their imaginations, consider what their ideal future community would look like, and debate it with fellow members of the community. It is important to involve as many different individuals and groups representing as broad a spectrum of community interests as possible. For best results, include planners and decision-makers such as municipal councillors.

Community mapping has been used to map everything from toxic waste sites needing clean-up, to areas of crime for Neighbourhood Watch programs, to the best sites for affordable housing. These maps can be introduced and displayed during the official plan process, as a way of encouraging others to review and comment, thus expanding the scope of issues addressed during the official plan review.

Visual Preference Study

A visual comparison of different development options for a community can help achieve consensus around desired models of growth. This involves showing participants images of various development options and having them rank the options in order of preference. Scores are then tallied and all the images are reviewed for their defining characteristics. After discussing and summarizing the results, the comments can be submitted for official plan purposes. Smart-growth supporters can then visually demonstrate to planners and developers the key characteristics of urban design, density and development standards desired by the community.

OTHER TIPS

Fact-Finding

- Telephone, write or e-mail staff in the municipal planning and engineering departments. Make sure you completely understand the policies and regulations relating to your situation. For a complex situation or one that is heading to a public hearing, you may need to hire your own land-use planner and/or lawyer.
- Visit the municipality's website to find minutes of council meetings, policy and budget information, and more.
- Examine annual and capital budgets of your municipality to see where and how funds will be invested (infrastructure, environmental enhancement, public transit spending).
- If it is a specific proposed development project that you are concerned about, scout the area. Walk around to see if there are any public notifications posted with details of upcoming public meetings. These are also often listed in local newspapers.
- Get as much information as possible from city staff. They are the same people who advise council, so they can be valuable resources to you as well. You can educate them about your group's position and the rationale for it.
- Check and double-check your facts.

Addressing the Political Level

Once you have equipped yourself with all the information you need (background, policy, budget, alternative solutions), you will want to convince your municipal council to bring about a change in policy. Focus your efforts on elected officials. Know who your allies are, and line them up as early as possible in your campaign. Remember that potential allies can sometimes be found in unexpected places!

Preparing for Meetings and Presentations

- Make sure your spokesperson is comfortable with your group's message.
- Contact the municipal clerk in advance to find the correct process and meetings to address your issue. Usually, you have a limited time to make a presentation.
- Prepare a brief summary of your main points and rationale, and send it to the municipal clerk to distribute to council in advance.

Making Your Presentation

- Prepare your presentation well in advance, practise delivering it, and time it carefully.

Ontario Nature Organizes for Nature Protection

Ontario Nature successfully uses many of the techniques for advocating smart communities that are described in this chapter:

- Ontario Nature has engaged residents in one-on-one discussions about smarter communities through a door-to-door canvass, which operated from 2000 to 2004. In the writing of this community guide, we have greatly benefitted by communicating with Ontarians right where they live.
- Ontario Nature uses "direct mail" (mailings to tens of thousands of Ontarians) to convey our message about ensuring nature protection through smarter growth. Our mailings include solid information on conservation issues and an action step that people can take, such as signing a postcard to the Ontario premier or other cabinet ministers. We have delivered thousands of postcards to Queen's Park since 2000. Recent postcard campaigns were on urban sprawl and the Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt.
- Ontario Nature's website is brimming with information about protecting nature, curbing sprawl and promoting smarter communities. Our website receives thousands of "hits" per day from around the world.
- Ontario Nature runs the Advocates for Nature program in which we issue "action alerts" by e-mail to the thousands of advocates who have signed up. An action alert explains an urgent conservation issue, tells who an e-mail message should be sent to, and offers suggestions for what to write in the e-mail message.
- Ontario Nature issues news releases on hot conservation issues, holds news conferences to release new findings about conservation matters, and writes letters to newspaper editors to make our nature-first positions known.
- Ontario Nature meets with decision-makers – cabinet ministers, MPs, MPPs, political and ministry staff, municipal leaders, developers, our partners in other non-government conservation organizations – to share information and work positively together to find solutions to conservation concerns.
- Ontario Nature publishes *ON Nature* (formerly *Seasons*), an award-winning quarterly magazine that informs Ontarians about conservation and the environment, as well as many publications on specific conservation issues.

- Be polite and brief. Thank your audience for their time.
- Stay until the meeting is over, if possible. This shows your dedication and may give you an opportunity to interact with the media.
- Be ready to develop a plan of action if your strategy derails.
- Be persistent. Commit yourself to the long haul in getting your message across and your goals met.

Being Creative

There should be no limits to your creativity! Activist theatre, costumes and colourful displays are some of the actions that can be successful at the right venue with the right audience in mind. You and your group can likely come up with many novel ways to bring attention to your goals. More conventional but still creative tools include the following:

- Some Ontario groups have invited the media, politicians and public on urban-sprawl tours, to show them first hand the effects of low-density, poorly planned development.
- Ontario Nature has conducted one-day field trips for our members and supporters to show them important natural areas and how they are threatened by potential sprawl.
- Some groups have prepared a score card or report card by which they grade politicians or a government program's record on a series of urban planning and growth issues.

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

If you are in the communications game – trying to get a specific message out to the public, governments and the business community – then consider the media as a potentially valuable ally and indispensable communications vehicle. Whether you wish to air your grievances on a proposed development or celebrate a smart-growth success, the media can be very useful. In some cases, using the media may help to attract new allies. Media coverage sends a signal to your elected officials that your issue is important!

Your best hopes for regular media coverage are, of course, with your local newspaper, radio station and cable television station. Regional, provincial and sometimes national media outlets may be willing to carry your story if it has broader interest or significance. There are many media professionals who can help promote smart-growth messages, including newspaper publishers, radio or television station managers, researchers, assignment editors, producers, photographers, reporters, camera crews, copy editors and advertising staff.

Getting the Word Out

- **Cultivate relationships with reporters** who usually cover issues related to yours. Cultivating contacts with reporters takes time and needs nurturing, but it is essential. If you are a new group in town, make sure to introduce yourselves to reporters covering your issue, send them any materials you have, and invite them for further discussion. A reporter is looking for a story from a reliable source that is of interest to readers, so be sure to put yourself in his/her shoes by asking yourself, “What does this reporter need to run a good story?” Make media kits available. Respect reporters’ deadlines by returning phone calls promptly.

You will need to keep files or a database of media contacts with a bit of history on their involvement in your (or related) issues. Stay current by keeping up with newspapers, radio and television and by maintaining a news-clipping file (always marking the source and date for future reference).

Contact the Sustainability Network at (416) 324-2792 or info@sustain.web.ca for the Ontario edition of *A Basic Guide to the Media and Media Lists*.

- **Target your efforts to the audience you are trying to reach.** Different television stations and newspapers have different target audiences. Decide which media will best access your target audience and shape your message accordingly. For instance, for a smart-growth story that appears in a big-city newspaper, you will want to emphasize urban renewal efforts, whereas rural audiences may be more interested in hearing about greenspace conservation and farmland.
- **Communicate only when you have something to say.** Are you sure you have a newsworthy story? Reporters and editors are extremely busy, so make sure you use their time wisely.
- **Keep the message simple and clear.** Usually you want to have only one message, so make sure you know what that message is and the exact wording that will best communicate it. Remember that broadcast reporters work mainly with “sound bites” and that most people read at a general high-school level; most newspapers are targeted at the Grade 12 literacy level.
- **Send information updates for their files.** Do not expect reporters always to be on top of the latest news about your issue. By providing timely updates, you can nourish your media contacts,

- Make sure your story is newsworthy (has currency) and has an interesting “hook.”
- Try to keep your release to one page, but absolutely no more than two.
- Headline the release “For Immediate Release.”
- Include headline, date and location.
- State your key message in the first paragraph, which should contain no more than two sentences. Start with the heart of the issue; details and quotes come later.
- Always double-check your facts.
- Answer all the basic questions: who, what, when, where, why, how.
- Use one or two quotes from your spokesperson/people.
- Use short sentences.
- Provide one or two contact names and telephone numbers at the end. You may even want to provide other contact people relevant to the issue.
- Follow up with phone calls to reporters who are especially important to your group’s success.
- For additional background information, attach a backgrounder (1-2 pages).
- Although far more people have e-mail than home fax machines, it appears that many reporters prefer to receive news releases by fax.

Media Advisory

This is different from a news release since it is used to give the media notice of an event one or two days beforehand. Faxing a short description of the event, including the location and time, to reporters on your media list/database – without divulging your core news or message – is an essential method for getting media coverage of your event. Make the event sound compelling for reporters to cover. Put yourself in a reporter’s shoes and ask yourself: Does this event sound timely and newsworthy? Will it be worth my while to attend?

Media Kits

A media kit provides reporters with background material for a story. It is a valuable component of your communications/outreach effort and an excellent resource for reporters. A successful kit gathers an assortment of materials portraying your organization and issue in an interesting, informative and professional manner that inspires reporters to cover your issue. Be sure to carry a kit with you whenever there may be members of the media present. Always provide your spokesperson(s)’ name(s) and contact information in an obvious place in the kit.

News Conferences

You can hold a news conference for your local media, for example, on

the site of a proposed development or redevelopment. Keep your opening oral remarks – which expand on the printed release you have available for the media – to absolutely no more than 10 minutes, then leave an open-ended period for the media to ask you questions. Remember that you must issue a media advisory one or two days before the news conference.

If you have a story that you think will gain broad provincial interest, consider holding a news conference at Queen’s Park in Toronto. This is a very competitive and high-pressure venue at which to expose your news and your group, so use it only for a hot news item. A Queen’s Park reporter might be covering three or more stories in one day. For that reason, it’s doubly important that your news release say it all, since the reporter may take a copy and run, without hearing a word of what you have to say. Queen’s Park reporters usually have more time when the Legislature is *not* in session; your story is therefore more likely to be picked up by the media between sessions.

Call your MPP’s office. To find your MPP and his or her contact information, call the Government of Ontario information line at (416) 326-1234 or visit www.electionsontario.on.ca, or call the Inter-Parliamentary and Public Relations Office at (416) 325-7500 to find out when the Ontario Legislature is in session.

A group can book the media studio in the Legislative Building at Queen’s Park if an MPP will sponsor the news conference. Ask an MPP with whom you already have a working relationship to book the studio on your group’s behalf. If your own MPP is a cabinet minister, try a government backbencher or an opposition party member instead, since ministers don’t sponsor news conferences. The sponsoring MPP need not agree with everything you have to say, only that you have a right to state your case.

Media Interviews

- Use your organization’s name, not “I” or “we.”
- Be prepared to summarize your message in one minute or less.
- As spokesperson(s), show your enthusiasm for, interest in, and full knowledge of the subject.
- Practise by role-playing possible difficult questions and their answers ahead of time.
- Remind yourself of your target audience.
- Repeatedly state your message in a clear and consistent manner.
- Keep answers short, and give examples where relevant.
- Make positive statements (“We need to preserve this natural area for future generations” instead of “We need to stop all development”).
- Avoid defensive or offensive comments; maintain a friendly and

open manner.

- Avoid acronyms, jargon and technical terms.
- Always tell the truth. If you do not have an answer, get back to the reporter later.
- Answer the reporter's question, but always return to your main concern.
- Put the issue in context. Explain why it is important from a broad perspective.
- Keep to the facts. Maintain your credibility and professionalism, but do not be afraid to speak with some emotion.
- Promptly supply additional information or photos requested by the reporter.

Guest Editorials / Opinion Pieces

"Op-eds" are another valuable means of getting out your message. They are opinion pieces, usually from 600 to 800 words in length, that appear opposite a newspaper's editorial page (hence op-ed). Contact the newspaper editor before you begin writing so as to gauge his or her level of interest.

Emerging Media Opportunities

In addition to the traditional news media, the public increasingly receives information on critical issues from other sources:

- Many cities have **alternative weekly newspapers** that cover issues of local interest with a perspective or approach different from the mainstream media. These papers are often free and so are read by a large audience. In addition to news features, alternative weeklies often have sections offering brief updates on current issues.
- From the local to the national level, **magazines** are multiplying, offering new outlets for information. Consider submitting a story to one of the "niche" publications catering to your target audience. Contact the editor first to determine his/her level of interest and needs.
- **Electronic mail and websites** are becoming increasingly important outlets for information. You can make good use of them by posting on your website and listservs everything from small news stories to in-depth analyses related to local conservation and smart-growth issues.
- **Talk radio** is an increasingly popular media format. You can use this forum to your advantage to challenge some of the views that may be aired in these discussions.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

For long-term change, public education on the environment is essential. It helps create an informed public that is more likely to care about and act on smart growth. Identify different educational forums in your community, and investigate their appropriateness to your smart-growth work. From universities and colleges to zoos, nature camps and community centres, public education comes in many forms and reaches a wide range of audiences. Although educators may be cautious about a group with a strong agenda, they will likely be receptive to ones that can provide an educational and interactive experience.

Our job as advocates for smart communities is not to take the place of educators but rather to provide materials and training, link up with local exhibits, and help teachers to include smart growth in their curricula. You may be able to work with educators to enhance their level of knowledge, lead field trips, and so on. Or you may be able to work with a local museum or community centre to develop a display about a local development issue, the impact it has on the community, and the role you can play.

Keeping in touch with the Ontario Smart Growth Network

Visit the network at www.greenontario.org/smartgrowth and subscribe to the Get Smart e-newsletter and related listserv at <http://list.web.net/lists/listinfo/getsmart-1>

INFLUENCING THE DECISION-MAKERS

The struggle to protect nature and curb urban sprawl is deeply rooted in politics. Therefore, smart-growth supporters must learn the fine art of influencing both politicians and business leaders. You may want to persuade government to finance a project, adopt a certain policy, or improve or pass new regulations, by-laws or legislation that will support smart growth. You may also want to oppose laws or policies that are contrary to smart growth.

But let's start with the first step. To create smarter, environmentally sustainable communities, we need more and more "green" (environmentally progressive) municipal councillors, MPPs and MPs. Part of your responsibility as a community organizer is to help find green candidates for elected office and get them elected. One of those candidates could be *you!*

Ontario Nature is calling for significant policy changes at the provincial and federal levels to ensure a smarter future for Ontario. Since smart growth depends on regional planning (see Chapter 4), Queen's Park has a critical role to play in supporting better inter-municipal planning and

protection of greenspace. In addition, the province can champion the need for a renewed federal commitment to Canada's cities and towns.

Keep in mind that your primary goal is to influence government and business decision-makers. It can be a slow process, but if you have ideas about improving your community, it's what you need to do. A dialogue with government or business representatives provides them with reliable information on your smart-growth concerns and recognition whenever they act in a way that advances your goals. Remember that positive reinforcement is important when it comes to influencing the actions of government and business leaders. Also, the more people your group represents, the more influence you can bring to the table when meeting with these leaders.

To reach government and business leaders with your message, you have several options, ranked below in order of effectiveness:

- **Face-to-face meetings:** These provide both parties with an opportunity for real dialogue. It is an excellent way to present your message in some detail and build enduring relationships.
- **Letters on behalf of your group:** Individually tailored letters allow you to craft your group's thoughts on an issue in some depth. For a politician, an individualized letter is thought to constitute 100 or more votes on a particular issue. If you took the time to write, at least 99 other voters who have not written likely agree with your group's position.
- **Form letters:** A pre-written advocacy letter or card to which you affix your signature and address is still useful, but less effective than an individually tailored letter in terms of demonstrating your commitment to the issue.
- **Petitions:** Standardized forms available through your MP and MPP allow a message to which many people affix their signatures and addresses. Petitions may be useful in large numbers to indicate broad support for a particular issue but are not nearly as effective as individualized letters.

Building Relationships with Government and Business Leaders

- **Do your homework:** Know the leaders' backgrounds before approaching them so as to better tailor your message and respond to their concerns.
- **Network with your contacts:** Find out who you know who knows the leaders you want to contact, and invest time in educating those individuals.
- **Link your issue with the leaders' key issues:** Find out what issues are important to them, and make the link to your issue where possible. For instance, someone who is concerned about economic development will likely respond more to your concerns about sprawl draining commercial activity from the downtown core than they might about sprawl destroying natural areas.

- **Provide a service:** You can strengthen your relationship with government and business leaders and promote your smart-growth goals by offering to provide up-to-date information on specific issues, to collaborate on public events, and to present solutions.

Tips on Meetings with Government and Business Leaders

- Advise them in advance of who will be attending. One spokesperson is recommended, although a second can provide moral support and additional resources.
- Know and state your issue clearly, and stay on topic.
- Provide a brief written summary of your position (be sure of your facts), the solutions you are proposing, and the actions you are requesting.
- Be positive, professional, polite and thankful for their time.
- Demonstrate public support for your group's goals (number of members, letters written, etc.).
- Comment on any positive efforts they have undertaken with regard to smart growth.
- Follow up the meeting with a thank-you note.

Tips On Meeting Your Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP)

In addition to the above points:

- **Learn all you can about the riding and your MPP's background.** Review back issues of your local newspapers to give you a sense of the main issues of concern to fellow constituents and therefore to your MPP. As well, it may be worthwhile to look at some Hansard transcripts, which are the official record of the daily proceedings of the Ontario Legislature. Go to www.ontla.on.ca. You can read what your MPP has had to say on a variety of issues. You can also watch a few segments of the Legislature's question period on television (although everything said there is captured in the Hansard transcript).
- **Prepare and prioritize your questions.** Remember that because your MPP is busy, you are likely to get only a half-hour meeting. Your MPP may ask for a written list of your issues in advance.
- **Offer solutions.** Be sure to present your solutions to the problems you have raised. Make it clear which smart-growth action you would like support on.
- **Offer assistance.** You can distinguish yourself by offering to serve as a local resource on your particular issue. This can be in the form of providing written or oral information and timely updates.
- **Be flexible on the meeting location.** Your MPP may be able to meet with you at his/her constituency office, but be prepared to travel to Queen's Park in Toronto if necessary.
- **Be professional, polite and positive.** Since you want to build a

relationship, you do not want your first meeting to be your last.

- **Stay in touch.** Before leaving your MPP's office, leave your contact information or card with the executive assistant. It is important to make this contact with the MPP's "gatekeeper," the person who manages the MPP's schedule.

The Minister and the Premier

While few community groups are able to secure a meeting with a cabinet minister, and even fewer a meeting with the premier, telephone calls and letters on timely smart-growth issues are extremely important. In both the premier's and ministers' offices, the numbers of telephone calls and letters received are an important barometer of the public's concern on a given issue. It is likely that the staff taking the calls and receiving the letters will convey those concerns to the premier and ministers.

Keep telephone messages for the premier or a minister very short – one sentence is all that a staff person is likely to write down. Try to keep a letter to one page. Always try to offer a practical solution to the problem you raise. If you are writing to urge the premier or minister to take certain actions, point out why it is in the public interest to do so.

While you will almost always get a reply, it may arrive weeks or months after you sent your letter, since yours must compete for attention with many others.

Writing Effective Letters

So you're upset with the government's record on protecting woodlands. Or maybe they've just caved in again to yet another sprawling development proposal. You want to do something to help change their ways, but the enormity of the task makes success look hopeless. What can you do?

One of the most effective weapons, readily available and proven by the test of time, is a letter to the politician most responsible (the mayor and council at the municipal level, the chair/warden at the regional/county level, and the minister at the provincial/federal levels). Such letter-writing can become a fine art and a valuable advocacy tool, but many of us are unsure how to begin.

Do letters really work? Yes! If politicians receive dozens of letters on one side of an issue, they have a measure of residents' opinions and a basis for appropriate action. Often you may want to write to a politician as part of an organized campaign, to demonstrate the strength of numbers holding your view.

Educate yourself and your group members as much as possible about the issue, but do not let yourself be intimidated into keeping quiet. After all, an activist's job is to speak out! If you feel strongly that wildlife habitat should be preserved or that air quality needs to be improved, feel free to make your voice heard. The most important role of politicians is to set government goals, decide their priorities, and then instruct, cajole, pester

and bully the bureaucracy into accomplishing them. To do that, they often need your help for direction and moral support (and less frequently, for technical expertise). If you are uncertain about the technical issues, ask leading questions instead of making statements. In any case, be sure to include questions so that the recipient will have to respond.

Although the contents may vary according to the situation, in general your letters should be relatively short, forceful and to the point. Be as specific as possible without being tedious, and if you have the talent to be witty, a little humour never hurts.

Some other tips include the following:

- Try linking your particular cause to other government actions, policy statements, etc.
- Local examples are particularly effective ("Old Uncle Walt's farm would not have been sold to developers if only we had had this legislation in place").
- Be specific about what you want done. If you are unsure about exactly what action is needed, you could ask what options the official has examined to deal with this problem and what the advantages and disadvantages are to each one.
- Be prepared to wait at least a few weeks, and in some cases months, for a response.
- Be prepared to write a follow-up letter. Most responses are of three varieties – affirmative, agreeing with your stance (seldom); zero, ignoring all your questions and saying absolutely nothing (tried fairly frequently); and baffle-gab, swamping you with technical details and excuses (would probably be tried more often, but too much work).
- For your follow-up letter, go back to your original letter, and pull out all the questions that were not answered. Point out any inconsistencies between information in the response and other sources of information you may have. Also point out any inconsistencies that may arise in the reply letter itself. Refute their arguments where possible and point out the desirability of your goals.
- Be prepared to write a second and even third follow-up letter! The second reply you receive likely won't satisfy you either. Persistence often pays off, so consider this just the starting formality. Take the opportunity to point out some of the weak arguments that politicians make when they are not paying close attention. Or re-state your questions in a different way if they still have not been addressed.
- Copy your letters to other interested parties. Send copies to the leaders or relevant critics of the provincial opposition parties – it keeps them informed and provides them with ammunition to pursue your issue in the Legislature. If you are dealing with an issue of local interest, copy your letter to the local media. And if you are dealing with an issue of interest to a conservation group, send a copy to them as well.
- Always apply the three R's: Be Right, Reasonable and Repetitive.