

## **ALDERMANIC PROTOCOL: How to Interact with Your Alderman**

In the midst of tremendous responsibilities, your Alderman works daily to improve the quality of life throughout the ward and wants to hear from you about how to do it better. Whatever impression you have about your local elected officials, remember that the Alderman is the closest point of contact between the community and the city government. No other legislator demonstrates a greater commitment to resolving multiple issues on a neighborhood level. Your Alderman responds to the entire ward's city services needs one constituent at a time.

### **Your Voice Counts!**

Call (773) 365-3535, email [ward35@cityofchicago.org](mailto:ward35@cityofchicago.org) , send a letter, come for a Ward Night visit, set an appointment or visit the website [www.reycolon.org](http://www.reycolon.org). The Alderman's Office is constantly encouraging community participation while sharpening its ability to serve constituents and measure public opinion. One skill all elected officials learn to master is their ability to count-- counting votes, counting visits to the website, counting contributions to the campaign fund, counting e-mails and voicemails, counting phone messages, counting phone calls, counting letters and counting every meeting, deadline and office visit. Here is a basic recommended protocol that you should practice to make your voice count and interaction with the Alderman's Office a more rewarding experience.

### **Ward Night**

Ward Night is designed for neighbors to meet with the Alderman on an *individual* basis. Your Alderman has Ward Night every Monday evening from 5:30pm to 8:30pm. You can speak to the Alderman individually for 15 minutes at a time on a first-come, first-serve basis. The Alderman's key Ward Office Staff is also available to serve all your City of Chicago Service needs at this time and throughout the week during regular business hours. If you would like to organize a *group* to meet with the Alderman, schedule an appointment or invitation for a site visit.

### **Scheduling an Appointment or a Site-Visit**

Call, email or come to the office to *make an appointment*. Ask to speak to the scheduler. There is a downtown office at City Hall, but your Alderman's primary office is with the voters in the Ward. Your Alderman is happy to meet with you at the Ward's Community Services Office. Whatever the reason for the meeting, be honest and keep your request for time brief, 15 minutes is a long enough time to discuss your views on a particular issue. Respect for the Alderman's time will be appreciated and remembered the next time you want access to the Alderman's schedule.

#### ***Be specific for the reason of wanting the appointment.***

Do you have a service request? Do you have a problem? Do you want to discuss a position, which you agree or disagree on? Do you want a zoning change? Do you want to speak generally about issues? Do you want the Alderman to co-sponsor or support an idea or legislation? Are you inviting the Alderman to speak at a function? Make your intentions known. Your appointment is finalized when the Alderman's scheduler gives you a meeting confirmation.

### **Get to know the Ward Office Staff.**

The Alderman often meets with constituents themselves, but also has highly capable and qualified staff. Do not feel as if you are being ignored because you are dealing with a staff person. The Alderman relies heavily on the staff for scheduling, specific legislation and advice on constituent issues. Most of the information the Alderman receives comes directly from the staff. If you get a credible staff to see things your way, you have been successful.

### **Write the Alderman a Letter**

Individuals may choose to make written contact with the Alderman. The Alderman counts pieces of mail and electronic e-mails to measure public opinion for or against an issue in the ward or the city. When writing a letter:

**Identify Yourself.** Make sure the Alderman knows you are his constituent. You can assume the staff person recognizes the addresses in the community, so include your name and address. Do not send anonymous letters.

**Cover One Subject Per Letter.** Different staff persons may cover different issues. If you have more than one issue, write more than one letter.

**Cite The Ordinance.** Identify the issue or ordinance number. If possible, mention who introduced the legislation, how many other Aldermen have cosponsored it and what the impact will be if passed. This demonstrates to the Alderman that you are serious about the issue and are keeping a close watch on the progress of the legislation.

#### **Sell Your Position.**

- Be brief and concise.
- Type or write legibly so that your letter is easy to read.
- State your position and exactly what you want the Alderman to do in your first paragraph.
- Your own experiences and observations will help sell your position. Give reasons for your position. Remember, when you write, you are essentially selling your idea on an issue to the Alderman. The Alderman will want to know how a bill or proposal will affect the lives of the constituents.

### **Contact the Alderman by Phone**

Just as letters are used to measure public opinion, the Alderman also counts phone calls that are either for or against an issue. Phone calls are most useful when a council meeting has been scheduled and there isn't time to write or visit the office. Call the main Ward Office number. Feel free to leave messages on the voice mail about your opinion on how to approach a vote if you are calling during non-business hours.

**What to Expect.** When you call your Alderman's office, expect that someone on the Ward Office staff will take the call. If you are calling to request information about the Alderman's position on an issue or to register your opinion, your call will most likely be transferred to the staff person in charge of that particular issue. He or she will be able to discuss the Alderman's position with you in more detail.

**Identify Yourself.** Make sure the staff person knows you live in the Ward. Be sure to provide the staff member with your name and phone number for follow-up.

**Cover One Subject Per Call.** Different staff persons cover different issues. Do not assume that the person you are speaking with handles all issues for the Alderman. If you have more than one issue, ask to speak to the staff person who is in charge of each issue.

**Sell Your Position.** Just as in letter writing, if there is a pending vote before the City Council, your call should be simple and to the point: I am from the ABC rights group, I support XYZ, and I urge the Alderman to vote for the ordinance. The information will be recorded and forwarded to the appropriate staff person. If the issue isn't pending on the floor of the City Council, it is important to be brief and short in your conversation. Your opinion is important, but the staff person will respect your use of time. Be prepared to state your position what you want the Alderman to do, and be ready to state your position with one or two supporting arguments.

### **Other Kinds of Contacts**

There are many formal and informal occasions when the Alderman interacts with the public. Most of these opportunities are free and open to the public. Candidate forums during elections, Ward Night, Open Public Meetings on Capital Projects or proposed Zoning-changes and attendance at special events are all **free opportunities** to talk to the Alderman. The Alderman expects questions during questions and answer sessions. Keep your questions short and to the point. Often, the Alderman is available before and after the events to meet people.

**Fund-raisers** are also great informal occasions to get to know your Alderman, supporters, other elected officials and the movers and shakers in your area. Fund-raisers and some special events may require a contribution. If the crowd is large, you might have to wait to get a handshake, but if the crowd is small, you can try to engage the Alderman in real conversation. The Alderman spends a lot of time meeting constituents, contributors, workers and volunteers. You can use this time to introduce your position and make brief comments.

### **Follow-Up on Your Contact**

**Request a reply.** You are more likely to receive a reply if you ask for one.

**Ask Alderman's Position.** You can also ask your Alderman how he will vote on a particular ordinance or ask about his position on an issue. Request his personal involvement in a particular issue. When you receive a reply from the Alderman indicating that he agrees with you or he intends to vote for the position you have advocated, write back and thank him.

**Follow-Up.** If you receive a reply, which indicates that the Alderman intends to vote in opposition of your position, write back and explain your position again. Put the heat on and don't let him off the hook.

**Follow-Up again.** This cannot be said enough. You will maximize the impact of your contact with the Alderman by following up. Following up lets the Alderman know that you are serious and committed, and it gives you the opportunity to get to know each other. You may not agree this time, but whatever you learn from your experience may come in handy on the next issue.

**Answers may take time.** The Alderman may not have an immediate answer for you. Ask when you can expect an answer. If the staff person does not have an answer for

you, ask that they speak with the Alderman and get the answer, and get back with you either by letter or phone.

**Show appreciation.** When you receive a reply by phone, be sure to thank the Alderman or staff person for getting to you, even if the information about the official's position is bad news. Establishing a good relationship with the staff will help you when you need to contact the office again.

### **Other Protocol Tips**

**Be direct** and concise in your presentation. Know what you want the Alderman to do and be able to present your views clearly. It is the point of the discussion that is important, not the length.

**Be thoughtful.** Comment on the things, which you believe the Alderman does right. Treat the Alderman the same way you would like to be treated.

**Be reasonable.** Recognize that there are differences of opinion. Never indulge in threats or recriminations.

**Be realistic.** Do not expect that everything will go your way and do not be too critical when it does not.

**Be accurate and factual.** Make sure you have the necessary information to do a good job in presenting your case.

**Be Understanding.** Put yourself in the Alderman's place. You will be more likely to have your situation better understood.

**Be friendly.** Don't just contact your Alderman when you need something. Stay in touch and invite the Alderman to events and functions whenever possible.

**Give credit where credit is due.** If an issue goes the way you wanted, remember to acknowledge the Alderman's efforts. The Alderman represents a diverse constituent base that is active on a wide-range of issues. The Alderman relies on many organizations and individuals like you to achieve successes throughout the ward.

**Support your Alderman.** If at re-election time you believe the Alderman deserves it, give your support. It takes volunteer workers and financial supporters to keep your elected official in office. If you believe the Alderman has a good or excellent record, tell him. Our friends in government like to know that their hard work is appreciated.

**Do not demand anything.** Being rude or threatening is counterproductive. There is always the future. The Alderman may disagree with you on one issue today and be your strongest advocate tomorrow.

**Do not be vague or deceptive,** righteous or long-winded. *Do not remind the Alderman that you are a taxpayer and voter in the ward.* Remember, the Alderman knows how to count and knows if you are a consistent voter or not.

**Do not be an extremist.** Remember the Alderman represents all of the ward's constituents; those you consider liberal and those you consider conservative. Do not condemn the Alderman when he supports a position you think is too liberal or too conservative.

**Do not be busybody.** Elected officials do not like to be pestered, scolded or preached to. Neither do you. Do not use the Alderman's Office to replace your responsibility of being a good communicating neighbor.

**Be cooperative.** If your alderman makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. You can assist your Alderman by providing information as requested. Do not back away from getting more involved in your community for fear that you are getting into politics.

**Be a Leader in your community.** Take an active role and participate in organizing a Block Club, attend CAPS meetings, and join a Local School Council, Park Advisory Council, or another organized group. Your Alderman must respond to organized groups. Whenever possible, demonstrate how you speak for common interests in the community. Back claims with petitions and letters when appropriate. Let the Alderman or staffers know how you intend to communicate back with your neighborhood about your visit.

### **Congratulate Yourself!**

Every contact you make and get others to make is a triumph of participation in democracy. For most people, government is a spectator sport. By putting to practice the basic protocol outlined here, you become one of the most important and powerful people in America.