

Lobbying 101 for Feral Cat Advocates

An animal's strongest advocate may be you. That's because you, as a citizen, have the power to influence your legislators – especially on a local level. You do not need any prior experience to help pass pro-animal legislation; all you need is the determination to communicate with those who represent you in your local, state, and federal governments.

The number of caretakers and organizations devoted to helping feral cats is growing. As a result, some local governments now recognize that a comprehensive cat management strategy to combat cat overpopulation requires working with feral cat advocates. Our guidelines will help you work with officials to propose legislation that affects domestic cats – especially feral cats

A Quick Refresher

Most local governments are run by a small group of elected individuals. This group could be as small as 3 people or have more than 20 people. These individuals are elected by the public and may be called councilmen, aldermen, magistrates, commissioners, or any number of other titles. As a group, they're usually called a board or a council. This document refers to them as councils.

A proposed ordinance or law is born as a bill that may come from a county commissioner, a member of the public, or another government official, like the police chief or animal care and control director. In many communities, a bill must come from a commissioner; this commissioner is called the bill's sponsor. Even if a bill is introduced by someone other than a commissioner, it will ultimately need the interest of at least one commissioner (if not a majority) for further consideration.

The basic path of a bill is introduction, then a discussion or public hearing, and finally voting. However, there can be some big differences between communities. Here are a few variations that can be seen:

- Some councils will have an introductory hearing for every bill to decide whether to give it a full public hearing (though these introductory hearings may be public too).
- Large councils may have subcommittees of commissioners who discuss a bill before bringing it back to the full council for a public hearing and/or vote.
- Not all bills are limited to one public hearing and vote; in some cases, a bill may have multiple hearings and will need to be voted on several times successfully to pass.
- Mayors or county executives may have the ability to veto a bill that a council passes.
- Most, if not all jurisdictions employ an attorney to review all bills to make sure they are legal and constitutional.

Where to Start

At what level of government should you pursue your legislation? Should you go to the city council, county government, or state legislature? While a state law helps the most animals, working for enactment of a local ordinance makes the most sense if you are primarily concerned about a local issue. First, local animal care and control laws are generally easier to get funded—and that is also where they will be enforced. In addition, once several local jurisdictions have ordinances covering the same issue, a similar state law will be more politically feasible. Finally, because it is easier to work for change in your

own geographic region and with people you know, you might want to make your first attempt at the city or county level.

First, it's important to understand what the *local* part of local government means. Are you in a city, town, township, village, parish, or county? The basic premise of government is the same for all of them, but you'll want to be sure that you're involved in the community in which you live. Once you make the decision to get involved, you don't need any special education or training. However, if you want to be effective, it's important to have a basic understanding of how your local government works. You may want to start by checking out your city or county website for information on elected officials and the ordinance process. Another option for learning is to attend a few of the council meetings. Even if the issues that they're considering are not animal-related, you can get a sense of the process. These councils often consider a wide variety of issues. They may not always be fun, but they are educational.

Get the Facts

Before presenting your case for an ordinance, you must document the cat-related issues and problems in your community. You may want to start by contacting your local animal care and control agency and/or animal shelter and humane society. Each is an independent organization with its own policies, priorities, and governance. In the case of humane societies, they are governed by their own bylaws and board of directors; in the case of municipal animal care and control agencies, they are governed by local ordinances and officials.

Compile these statistics for your community shelter:

- How many cats enter local shelter(s) each year?
- How many of those cats are stray (owned cats who have either become lost or been abandoned), feral or have been surrendered by their owner?
- How many stray cats entering the shelter(s) are reclaimed by their owners?
- How many cats are adopted?
- How many cats stray, feral and surrendered are euthanized?

In states with a Freedom of Information Act, agencies or private organizations operating under a municipal contract are required to divulge their records to the public upon request. This information can support your case for the necessity of legislation. As an example, with few exceptions, the percentage of stray cats returned to their owners is abysmally low, while for dogs it can be quite high. Statistics from your local shelter(s) may show, for example, that cats make up a relatively high percentage (often above 50 percent) of the animals entering the facilities and that the percentage has been increasing steadily in recent years. The data may also show a wide disparity between the reclaim rate for dogs and that for cats. If this is the case, one explanation is that few pet cats wear any form of identification. Educating the public about the importance of identification for pet cats will increase the number of lost cats who are returned to their owners.

Track the number and kinds of complaints that animal care and control agencies receive regarding cats; these will include, but not be limited to, general nuisance calls and reports of attacks on wildlife, destruction of property, and cats roaming "at large." This information may not be easily obtained.

Know the issues that relate to feral cats in your community. For example, public health officials are most concerned about feral cats because they may come in contact with rabid wildlife and contribute to the risk of this disease. Informing officials that rabies vaccinations are a basic requirement of TNR will be an important selling point. Knowing how to respond to common questions, such as how the cats will be revaccinated, is just as important.

The information you have gathered will be useful and necessary as you explain why a new ordinance to allow TNR for feral cats or an exemption for feral cats in an existing animal control ordinance is important in your area. Your efforts to educate your community about the need for such legislation can make a critical difference in whether the bill passes.

Introduce Yourself to Your Local Government

Schedule a meeting with your commissioner and talk about your interests. He or she should be able to quickly explain how your local government works. This is also a great way to start building a relationship. If you live in a big city, you may not have access to your commissioner and instead may have to talk to his or her staff.

Whenever you're in contact with an elected official or an official's staff, it's essential that you maintain a polite and professional tone. If you're meeting in person, be sure to dress well. You don't have to wear a new suit, but your ensemble needs to convey respect for the commissioner as well as demonstrate your own self-respect.

Animal issues are fairly easy to get people interested in. Even if your commissioner doesn't have a cat, odds are that he or she has had one before or has friends or relatives with cats. Even those elected officials who don't have a hands-on fondness for animals can appreciate the importance of the humane treatment of animals, as well as the financial and public safety impacts that animal ordinances have on the community.

The worst case scenario is that your commissioner may not be especially animal-friendly; he or she may even come off as hostile. If that's the case, don't take it personally. Maintain your professionalism. You may find your commissioner's opinions ignorant and insulting in some cases, but you don't want to burn any bridges. Also, some commissioners may surprise you by being very supportive of some animal issues, but opposed to others. Since you may need their vote on another issue down the road, agree to disagree on some things and work together on those issues on which you do agree.

A Note for Non-Profit Employees

If you're an employee of an animal shelter or other non-profit organization, it's important to familiarize yourself with laws regarding lobbying. When you meet with an elected official or testify on a bill, that's considered lobbying. If you're only representing yourself, then there are no restrictions, but if you're representing a non-profit organization, speak to your organization's attorney about any rules and limitations that may apply. You may need to keep track of all of your lobbying.

Legislative Tips

Once you have learned how the legislative process works in your jurisdiction and how a bill gets passed into law, follow these tips to improve your odds of success.

- **Be inclusive.** Before you begin to work on a bill, discuss your effort with others who will be most involved. For example, if you want to do something to help feral cats, invite both those who support and oppose TNR to the table. Understand that your full agenda might not be reachable, but that successful public policy usually involves a series of compromises and incremental steps.
- **Work with your local animal care and control agency.** It's vital to work in partnership with your local animal care and control agency or nonprofit humane organization if the latter has a contract to provide animal control and/or sheltering services for animal control in your community. That agency or organization will be responsible for implementing and enforcing the ordinance provisions and in many communities may wield considerable influence with local officials. Remember that enforcement is a key part of the success of most laws, and that if the enforcing agency isn't an enthusiastic supporter of your idea, you'll have made few gains for feral cats. Don't overlook this potential supporter or opponent. For one thing, if you go to the person or agency above animal control, it's likely that person or agency will contact animal control to find out its position on the issue. In addition, knowing the reasons that the enforcing agency isn't an enthusiastic supporter will allow you to gather well-thought out responses to its opposition.
- **Involve others.** Whenever a bill affects animals, legislators will defer to a veterinarian. For a municipal ordinance, enlist the support of local veterinarians. In addition to the humane community and veterinarians, involve other stakeholders who are directly affected by the issues in your bill.
- **Form a coalition of backers for your bill.** Supporters could include cat advocates, cat breeders, birders and other wildlife advocates, law enforcement officials, chambers of commerce, civic associations, government workers, key members in the community, public health officials, and student groups. Think of anyone who will benefit from your bill; benefits may include improved public health and safety, taxpayer savings, and fewer neighborhood complaints.
- **Know the opposition.** Don't let your elected officials be surprised to find out that a major constituent group strenuously opposes the bill. If you inform them about the opposition's objections early on and explain why they are misguided, you will be more successful.
- **Neutralize potential opposition.** If the bill would have a negative impact on a specific group, or even if a group indicates that the bill might have a negative impact on it, try to work with the group early in the process. The more opposition you can negate, the better the chances for your bill.

Write Your Bill

- **Get help in drafting your bill.** Although it should be clear to you what your objectives are, the actual language of the bill should be reviewed by professionals. You may be able to enlist the expertise of a local humane society board member who is a lawyer or has an association with a law firm or the counsel who works for the city or county council. You can also ask for pro bono help from a local law firm.
- **Define your terms.** A good bill includes definitions of terms that might not be clear. For example, the term “animal” has many different meanings depending upon how a bill defines it. What exactly is meant by “animal shelter”—all public and private facilities? What constitutes a “feral cat”? It’s possible that a local ordinance may already define many terms, so see what existing law says first.
- **Draft your bill with costs in mind.** Try to create a bill that generates sufficient funding to cover its expenses. Programs that cost the municipality money to implement but that aren’t funded by new revenue streams often go unimplemented.
- **Consider exceptions to the bill’s coverage.** Should you exempt certain cats from your proposed legislation? For instance, a bill that requires registration could include special protections for feral cat caretakers who register with the city or county. Similarly, a bill defining a pet owner and the responsibilities that pertain to owners could exempt caretakers of managed feral cat colonies.
- **Find a good sponsor for your bill.** Approach legislators who have sponsored animal protection laws in the past. If the bill must be heard (considered or examined) by a committee, try to get someone on that committee to sponsor your bill.
- **Develop healthy relationships.** As you lobby for your bill, be sure to develop good relationships with key legislators and legislative staff, including the bill sponsor’s staff. They have great influence over what happens, and they can provide you with important information and insight.
- **Help move your bill.** As the bill goes through the process, you will probably be called upon to provide additional information, lobby certain elected officials, alert your supporters, and talk with the press. Don’t expect the bill to move without help.
- **Work the media.** Contact the local newspapers and other members of the media early in the process to explain your issue and why your proposed ordinance is important. Don’t assume that they will get good, fair information if you don’t supply it to them. And remember that letters to the editor are an effective tool for getting information to your community.
- **Always identify yourself to city or county officials.** Make it clear what issue you are discussing and whether you are representing yourself or a group.

- **Be polite.** This is especially important when lobbying elected officials to support your bill. Even if they won't support you on this bill, they may work with you in the future on another issue.
- **Be honest.** If you don't know the answer to a question that a legislator or staff member asks, just say so. Tell the person that you will get back to him or her with the correct information, and then follow up.

Testify! Testify! Testify!

If hearings are held, carefully choose who will testify for your bill. Although as many people who want can testify, one person usually speaks first as the bill's representative. Select someone who is comfortable with public speaking and who can deftly handle any questions that come up. It may be possible to give testimony with someone at your side who can provide facts. Anyone who has a relevant human interest story to tell is good, but testimony should be kept short. It should be given from notes and make no more than four or five clear points.

Testifying at a public hearing is your chance to speak directly to the entire board of commissioners or city/county council members about why a bill should or shouldn't be passed. Before you even get to the meeting though, you'll want to prepare ahead of time. Here is a list of tips to get you to the meeting and through your testimony.

- **Work smart.** Although one person may represent your bill, the working group should help plan that person's testimony and additional statements provided by members of the group. Even those who don't want to speak can help your cause by packing the room and wearing badges or carrying signs to show their support.
- **Study the issue.** In addition to your knowledge, it may be helpful to cite scientific studies which support your points. Also, talk about the successes of other communities who have similar ordinances. If you're testifying against a proposed ordinance, such as a feeding ban, focus on the successes of alternatives (TNR.). Avoid emotional appeals. Don't plead for the kitties.
- **Know your time and practice.** Most hearings have a time limit for each speaker and it's usually three to five minutes. It's essential to find out the limit ahead of time so you can practice accordingly. Write down some notes and practice with family or friends, or even your cat. It may sound silly, but it's great to practice in front of pets; they're usually happy to listen and won't judge you.
- **Send in written testimony.** Before the hearing, send in written testimony to the commissioners. This is an opportunity to include statistics and other facts which are important, but may not lend themselves well to your short time for testifying.
- **Don't read your written testimony; don't read a speech.** Legislators should already have your written testimony, so you don't need to read it. Instead of a speech, use your notes to remind yourself of important topic.
- **Respect.** Always show self-respect by dressing appropriately. Also, show respect to the commissioners, the legislative process, and other speakers, even those who disagree with you. Don't use your time to nit-pick the testimony of others. Don't cheer or boo other speakers. Be sure to thank the commissioners for the opportunity to testify.

- **Keep in touch.** Regardless of what happens at a bill's hearing, follow up with the commissioners after the meeting. You can send them an email thanking them for the opportunity to speak. If they passed the bill, thank them for that too. If the bill will be discussed more in the future, you can offer your expertise in case they have any more questions.

Working the Media

Government officials ultimately answer to their constituents, so even though much of your work will involve swaying the opinions of your commissioners, don't forget about the general public. You can get the word out through newspaper op-eds or letters to the editor. If you have any contacts with a local television station, try to get them to cover the issue. Even though local politics are easily overshadowed by major news, animal stories are a great fit for slow news days.

A Drawn-out Process

There's no way to tell how long it will take for a local bill to pass or fail. From conception it will likely be at least a few weeks on the short end. On the long end though, it could be many months. Some bills or discussion may begin on one topic, but end up morphing into a much larger or much different discussion.

- **Know when to compromise.** Rarely does a bill become law without being amended. Sometimes you can include provisions knowing that they will be compromised away at a later date. Don't be surprised if you can't get all the provisions you want, but be prepared to make hard choices. In general, if the amended ordinance will still help feral cats without lessening any protections they already have, then it is better to pass a lesser ordinance than nothing. You can try again later to increase protection.
- **Consider a "sunset" provision.** If you don't think your bill will pass, a strategy to make it more acceptable is to add a provision that would limit the ordinance's effect to a two-, three-, or five-year period. At that time, if the ordinance has not been successful, it would be eliminated. If it has been successful, the city or county may reauthorize it.

For in-depth information on achieving legislative victories for feral cats, read [include link to Activist Toolkit (<http://www.humanesociety.org/action/toolkit/>)

The End or Just the Beginning

If you were unsuccessful in your endeavors, it's not the end. Try to raise the issue again in a year or earlier if the opportunity presents itself. If elections change the make-up of your local council, you could potentially try sooner. Politics are a funny thing and you never know when or how they'll change. If you have to wait to re-try an issue, use the time in-between to bring up another cat issue. When all goes well, you can pat yourself on the back for doing a stellar job. Then, starting thinking about the next law you'd like to pass.

[Include links to Activist Toolkit (<http://www.humanesociety.org/action/toolkit/>) and these pages that were formerly on our website: TNR Ordinances, Animal Control Ordinances that Exempt Feral Cats, Writing a Letter to the Editor, Testimonials, Online HSU Courses]. I'm constantly sending them via email.