



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

A publication of Bowles Rice LLP

Summer 2014



Know Your Officials, Rules of Engagement When Seeking Government Help

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Mr. Alsop served as chief of staff to West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin from 2010 to 2013, where he developed initiatives and advised Gov. Tomblin on a wide range of issues, including personnel, budget, policy, scheduling, communications and statewide natural disasters. He also negotiated agreements on multiple legislative initiatives, including education, OPEB, mine safety and Marcellus Shale regulatory framework.

Prior to joining United States Senator Carte Goodwin's office in 2010, where he served as chief of staff, Mr. Alsop served as deputy general counsel and later Secretary of Revenue to former West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin.

During several years in private practice, he advised and assisted energy-related clients on matters regulated by the West Virginia Public Services Commission.

Mr. Alsop earned his law degree, *summa cum laude*, from the West Virginia University College of Law in 2002. He received his bachelor of arts degree, *summa cum laude*, from West Virginia University in 1999.

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Almost every aspect of business requires interactions with one, if not multiple, governmental agencies. On most days, those interactions are seamless – we pay taxes, we abide by the applicable rules and regulations, and we get the services that our governments have been tasked with providing. There are instances, however, when an action taken by a government official causes significant consequences on our businesses, our families and our friends. Or there may be instances when our livelihood is dependent upon a potential course of action that a government official is contemplating.

During my tenures with West Virginia Governors Earl Ray Tomblin and Joe Manchin, I saw firsthand how agencies respond to criticism, pressure and requests for help. In some cases, there are simply no methods or tactics that will help resolve a situation. But in

those cases where a potential path to success is attainable, there are rules of engagement that can put you in the best position to achieve your goals.

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Respecting and being courteous to government employees will pay off in the long term. Most government employees want to do their job well. And most employees



The West Virginia Capitol complex in Charleston, West Virginia

are conscientious, with high standards of integrity. Government employees also feel like they are overworked and underpaid (and a lot of them are). Many are in agencies with limited budgets and resources – making their tasks all the more difficult. Government employees are creatures of habit – they want to go to work, do their jobs, get compensated and enjoy their lives. Many people fail to realize these simple facts. If you treat officials with respect, they are much more likely to go out of their way to help when you need it.

The risk of over-playing your hand by exaggerating is not worth it. As many have said over the years, “If you tell the truth, it becomes a part of your past; if you lie, it becomes a part of your future.” If government employees trust what you do and what you say, then you are ahead of the game. So be forthright and do not exaggerate. In fact, it would not be uncommon for government employees to have experienced a similar situation before. If the government employee sees through an exaggeration, your credibility will be ruined and getting help will be all the more difficult.

Know the rules and know the facts. When a business or citizen complains about an action, the first thing a director or manager does is investigate the situation. And the first thing you will likely face when you have a problem is questions about your issue. There was nothing more frustrating than sitting in a meeting and within five minutes being faced with a constituent who was unable to answer the most basic questions about an issue. To achieve results, know the facts of the matter at hand. When relaying those facts, state your case in terms of how the official will likely view it. If an official understands where you are coming from, it will be easier to take them where you want to go.

Be a problem-solver, not a complainer Government employees, like most of us, tune out when they are lectured. And you

can completely lose them if you do nothing but complain. Because government employees are creatures of habit and often do not have the time (or will not take the time) to find a creative solution, the burden is on you. If you want relief from the government, the best scenario is to develop a game plan that allows a government employee to follow the path of least resistance to reach your favored result. The average government employee wants to do his or her job. You, on the other hand, want a particular outcome. So make it easy for the government employee to reach that outcome.

Listen. Then facilitate a dialogue. Sometimes government employees will fail to recognize a particular fact situation or a unique set of circumstances that should lead to a different result. Ask questions, and learn by listening. By asking the right questions, you can often lead to a constructive dialogue and creative solutions.

Give governmental officials a chance to help before leveraging pressure from elected officials. Oftentimes many citizens would seek help from the Governor before giving an agency a chance to address an issue. This causes two problems. First, it makes agency staff mad for not providing them with the opportunity to fix the situation in the first place. Second, the first thing the Governor’s office is going to do is ask the agency to look into the issue. If you want an agency to trust you, then you need to reciprocate that trust by giving an agency the opportunity to fix the issue. If an agency has declined to resolve an issue,

then it may be necessary and appropriate to seek help from other parties.

There are, of course, times when push comes to shove and you must take appropriate action, even by way of judicial proceedings, when an agency takes an inappropriate action. Some situations cannot be amicably resolved. In most instances, however, keeping the above rules of engagement in mind when dealing with government officials will help you achieve the desired outcome. W

