

Legislative Training Day Focuses on Environmental Issues

ALBANY – About 25 people attended the Legislative Training Session at the New York State Capitol on April 16th. The session, sponsored and organized by the Federation of NY Solid Waste Associations, was designed to give members an inside view of the legislative process, government relations and current legislative efforts.

Senator Brian Kavanagh of the 26th Senate District and the chair of the NYS Caucus of Environmental Legislators explained some of the differences between the NYS Senate and Assembly, how the legislative process works from behind the scenes, and some background on current and past environmental legislation. Senator Kavanagh answered many questions from participants and gave valuable insight into the process and the hurdles that legislators face when trying to pass legislation.

Following Senator Kavanagh's presentation, an interesting panel spoke about how to communicate with legislators more effectively.

Katie Holman, of the New York State Association of Counties, gave a timeline of the legislative process, noting New York State has a short span to produce the budget, introducing it in January and passing it in April. She said advocacy fundamentals include being familiar with the issues, as well as having knowledge of all positions (even opposing views). She also reminded her audience that it is helpful to partner with other agencies.



Rajiv Shah

Jessica Ottney Mahar of the Nature Conservancy told attendees to “know your audience – and frame your discussion to suit their interest.” She said advocacy is an ongoing process and noted that a legislator's staff members are often the vital link to get information to the right source.

William Cooke, with the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, has 35 years of experience as a lobbyist. His advice was to make interactions with legislators quick and concise. “You have to be able to explain your issue in 45 seconds,” Cook said. “Don't be too technical; don't use acronyms; and stay on message.”

Another point he made was that lobbying and educating are different. “We have a never-ending need to educate. Legislators come and go (through the election process), and they are inundated from all over.” Therefore, much of the time spent communicating with legislators should be dedicating to education and this can be a strong form of advocacy. The speakers stressed that topics should be tailored to each legislator as each has individual priorities, so our topics can be framed to highlight varying implications – cost, health, the environment, etc.

The panel said to keep drop-in visits to five minutes and also advised having materials to leave behind – optimally a one page fact sheet which contains photos.



Andrew Radin, at the podium, who moderated the session, introduces the panel (left to right): Katie Hohman, Jessica Ottney and William Cooke.

Rajiv Shah, assistant secretary for the environment from the Governor's Office, spoke about some current legislative opportunities. He said there is presently a lot interest in organics, including food donations, composting, and food banks – and money in the budget for these issues. Also on the radar in Albany are some extended producer responsibility items, including pharmaceuticals and paint disposal. These topics are closely followed and actively supported by NYSAR's Legislative Committee.

Following the training session and lunch, participants put what they had learned to use! Participants split into groups and made visits to different state legislators, mainly focusing on the Federation's support for the current paint stewardship bill.



Following the speakers, attendees broke up into groups for discussion, followed by visits to different legislators' offices.