



HOW TO HOST A “SHOW CONGRESS” EVENT

Tips and templates to invite your member of Congress to see the benefits of bicycling

**LEAGUE OF AMERICAN BICYCLISTS
ADAPTED FROM AMERICA BIKES**

JULY 2014



CONTENT

» TOP TIPS FOR SHOW CONGRESS EVENTS	3
» INVITING YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS	5
» EFFECTIVE MESSAGING	7
» EVENT LOGISTICS	9
» GETTING MEDIA	10
» HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA	11
» WHAT TO DOCUMENT	12

Congressional calendars

Find out when your members of Congress will be back in your district.

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:

<http://majorityleader.gov/Calendar/>

U.S. SENATE:

<http://www.senate.gov>

(Link to calendar in the right column)

Cover image: Former Minnesota Congressman James Oberstar with the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Minnesota



Content adapted from America Bikes: americabikes.org



Rep. Mike Quigley (IL-05) (blue shirt)
on a Kidical Mass Ride in 2014

10 Tips for a Successful ‘Show Congress’ Event

The basic concept of a “Show Congress” event is to connect a member of Congress with bicycling by arranging their participation in a trail opening, ribbon-cutting ceremony, or community bike event in a way that is visual, public, and fun.

The bottom line is that you want to make your Senator or Representative look good back in their home district or state with an event that is positive, photogenic, and connected with bicycling in some way.

Participating in an event like this also means you meet staffers, both DC-based and those who work in a district office. These connections always prove to be beneficial. Here are some things to consider for putting on an event.

Site location

It’s best to create an event that includes a bike facility — a bike lane, bike share station or mountain bike trail — and it’s even better if that site is in a town where your Representative or Senator has a district office. This will increase the likelihood that your member or staffer can attend as it will mean a relatively short distance to travel. Even a great event concept may not be enough to attract your Senator or Representative if it requires a long drive (more than 20 minutes) to a remote part of the district.

Timing

Keep in mind that your Senator or Representative will be busy and may have a limited amount of time to spend at your event. If you can link your event to something else they’re doing later the same day at a nearby location, this will help. Twenty minutes is often the limit for your Senator or Representative to attend, as the staff will likely have a full day of stops or meetings scheduled.

Working with staff

You might begin this process by working with a staffer based in a D.C. office, but you'll likely end up working with a district- or state-level staff person. Staff changes are common at the D.C. office level, but district staffers tend to stay on the job longer, which is good for building long-term partnerships.

Proposing the event

You need to package the event so the staff person can readily understand it and see a clear benefit. It also needs to be a complete package — if it includes a bike ride, you need to bring the bike and a helmet. You may also need to provide a bike and helmet for a staff person. Keep in mind, too, that many Senators or Representatives might not be comfortable on a bike, so check with staff before arranging a ride.

Being flexible with dates and locations

It's a good idea to present several options the staff can work with depending on the Representative or Senator's schedule back in the district. Remember, too, that all your planning might get derailed by last-minute schedule changes. A weekend event that's on track mid-week might be interrupted by a vote back in D.C. It's good to be ready with Plan B.

Packing the event

Getting a Representative or Senator to attend is only part of the equation. You need to ensure that lots of people attend your event, too, even if it means staging them to appear at a certain time. Members of Congress love constituents

(and kids) so make sure that lots of them will be on hand to talk, say thanks, pose for pictures, etc. Using a bike club or organized ride is a good backdrop to ensure a good turnout.

Keeping it positive

Remember this is a “feel good” event. It's not the time to press a Representative or Senator about a particular issue. Build a relationship now that will set the table for the heavy lifting later. Keeping it positive will help build trust between you and the staff.

Garnering press/media

Press or media coverage adds a compelling reason for your Representative or Senator to attend. Try to ensure that local newspapers, TV, and other journalists will be on hand for interviews, photos, blogs and social media. Getting a Representative or Senator back in the district for a bicycle event or trail event is newsworthy and usually a great photo-op. In some cases, the congressional staff will help with press releases and coordinating with the media. Clarify media roles well in advance.

Community support

Integrating other members of the community will help provide extra appeal to a member of Congress. Ensuring local business owners, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement District or local bicycle retailers can help by adding an economic development / business message. Health, aging or transit organizations are also valuable partners to help show that bicycling infrastructure has broad-based support.

Post-event follow-up

After your event, follow up with a thank-you notes, calls, or emails to congressional or district staff, as well as to the Senator or Representative. It's also a good idea to thank any press or media who participated.



Sen. Al Franken (D-MN) at the 2013 Urban Cycling Festival in Minneapolis with members of the Major Taylor Cycling Club of Minnesota

Inviting your Member of Congress

Sample Invitation

Below you'll find a sample letter to create a meeting request or invitation for your Member of Congress. Fill in any bracketed areas with information specific to your project. Try to keep the letter to one page, and put it on letterhead if possible. As noted, try to get a prominent community member (mayor, principal, local business leader, or local nonprofit leader) to sign the letter. Fax or email your letter directly to the scheduler for the Member of Congress. Each office generally has a preference for how requests should be submitted, so it's important to call first and ask how they would like to receive the invite.

The Honorable [Member's First and Last Name]
[U.S. House of Representatives OR U.S. Senate]
ATTN: [Scheduler Name, obtained by calling the Congressional office]
[Mailing address]
[Fax Number or Email address (depending on how you are sending the request)]

Dear [Representative or Senator] [Member's Last Name]:

I write to you on behalf of [your organization, or if applicable: a coalition of organizations and individuals in your district who are working to make it safer to walk and bicycle]. We would like to invite you to a celebration of [your project], a [short project description].

We would appreciate the opportunity to show you more about this exciting project. We will be holding an event on [proposed date and time] at [location]. The event will [brief description of type of event]. The event will last approximately [length of time] and we would be honored if you would agree to [speak/observe/participate – whatever role you want the legislator to play]. As this is a community event, you will have the opportunity to interact with a number of community leaders, including [list names and organizations of some key participants and attendees]. Assuming you are able to join us, we would also be pleased to work with your press secretary to invite local media to cover the event.

I greatly appreciate your consideration of this request. You or your staff can reach me at [insert phone number and email address] to follow up.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Organization]

cc: [list individuals and organizations who are mentioned in the letter as attending/participating in your event or meeting. Make sure to send these individuals a copy of the letter via email.]

Sample Script for Following Up with Scheduler

Approximately one week after you've submitted your scheduling request by fax or email, call the scheduler to follow up if you haven't heard back. Your goal is to get a yes or no answer regarding your request. It may take a few calls to reach the scheduler, so be persistent. The script below will help you work with the scheduler.

Call the Congressional office — either the Washington, D.C. office or the district office where the scheduler is located — and speak with whoever answers the phone.

Hello, this is [your name, organization] calling. I'd like to speak with [scheduler name] to follow up on a scheduling request I submitted last week, please.

If the scheduler is not available, leave a message:

Hello, this is [your name, organization] calling. I submitted a scheduling request last week related to [your project] and was calling to follow up to see if Representative/Senator [last name] is available. If you could give me a call back at [phone number] soon, I'd greatly appreciate it.

Once you are able to speak with the scheduler:

Hello, this is [your name, organization] calling. I submitted a scheduling request last week [for an event on [date]] and am calling to follow up. I was wondering if you had any information on whether Representative/Senator [last name] would be able to attend.

If the scheduler says they haven't made a decision on the scheduling request yet:

I understand that you're probably trying to

balance a lot of requests, but we certainly hope this will be one that Representative/Senator [last name] will be able to accommodate. The event will also include [name of prominent individuals, such as the mayor, local business or nonprofit leader]. When would be a good time for me to call back to get an answer on this scheduling request?

If the scheduler says the Member of Congress won't be able to meet/attend the event:

We're very sorry to hear that Representative/Senator [last name] isn't available. Is there an alternate time or date that we might be able to make work? [OR, if you can't reschedule your event: Is there someone on the Representative/Senator's staff that might be able to fill in?]

If the scheduler says yes to the meeting request/event:

That's wonderful news. We so appreciate Representative/Senator [last name]'s willingness to attend. And, thank you so much for your help in arranging this.

I'd like to confirm the key details (date and time, length of event, legislator's role). How far in advance of the event/meeting should we check in again with you just to make sure we're still on the schedule? And, is it you we should be working with on any final logistical details?

I'd also like to make sure you have all my contact information, including my cell phone, in case anything comes up at the last minute. [provide your cell phone]

We are considering inviting the media to our event. Is there a press secretary on your staff that we should be coordinating with?

Effective Messaging for Your “Show Congress” Event

Effective messaging before, during, and after your “Show Congress” event can help you or your organization create a lasting and impactful relationship with your Senator or Representative and their staff.

When inviting your Senator or Representative, it’s best to focus on your event’s importance to the community. Your elected official’s staff should get the impression that your event will be a feel-good opportunity to meet constituents and receive positive press.

Keep these points in mind when reaching out to your elected official and their staff.

» *This event is an important celebration in your community.* Staff members who receive your invitation should have a clear picture of why this bike-centric event is important to constituents: for instance, annual tradition, celebrating healthy lifestyles, or local excitement around a new bike facility.

» *Happy constituents will be in attendance.* Staff should know this will be an opportunity to connect with voters in their boss’ state or district, including local families, business owners, local officials or bike commuters.

» *Your Senator or Representative’s role will be meaningful and not politically charged.* Suggest several non-controversial roles for your elected official, like cutting a ribbon or giving a speech. Staff will have a clearer understanding of the event if they know how you hope to engage their boss.

» *The event will celebrate biking and/or walking in your state or district.* The goal of the “Show Congress” event is to connect your official to biking in their constituency. If your Senator or Representative will speak at the event, the speechwriter should know to prepare talking points about the benefits of biking.

» *Media will be present to cover the event.* Staff look for good press opportunities for their bosses, so spread the word to local media and tell staff that reporters will be present. You can also ask to work with the elected official’s press secretary to arrange more coverage.



From left: Rep. Eleanor Holmes-Norton (blue dress) (D.C.) at a trail ground-breaking (photo courtesy of Washington Area Bicyclist Association) and Darlene Werfel at a cycling event with Congressman Larry Bucshon (IN-08)

Keep it Positive During the Event

Your Senator or Representative's participation in the actual event should connect your official with biking in your state or district in a non-political way. When people see photos and coverage of the event afterwards, they should see your elected official celebrating biking in their constituency.

During the public event...

- » Make your elected official look good. You want your official and their staff to have a good impression of you, your organization and of biking in their district.
- » Focus on connecting your Congressperson to biking. Create opportunities for the Senator or Representative to meet local constituents who bike, to celebrate a facility, or to enjoy the biking scene.
- » Keep a record of your official's remarks. Having a record of your official's pro-biking quotes will help build their support for biking legislation.
- » Take pictures of your elected official participating in the event. Photos of a Congressperson with kids in helmets are not only adorable — they're great press for your official and they visually connect your elected official with biking. Snap lots of pictures of

your Senator or Representative speaking, cutting ribbons, riding a bike, or posing with constituents on bikes.

- » Steer away from politically controversial subjects. Your elected official and their staff are present for a "feel good" event. This is not the time to press your official about a particular issue. Keeping it positive will help build trust between you and the staff.

Have a Private Conversation about Legislation

The end of a successful public event can be a great time to engage your Congressperson about biking and walking legislation.

- » Hold a brief, private conversation. This conversation should take place away from media crews and crowds, where your elected official can feel more comfortable speaking candidly.
- » Make the case for bicycling and walking. Use local success stories if you have them, or data on economic benefits. Reference our National Bike Summit fact sheets and Bicycle Friendly America Award database for information relevant to your community.
- » Make the "asks." Ask your elected official to support safe and accessible bicycling in your community by giving local governments more control over transportation funding.



Congressional bike champion,
Rep. Earl Blumenauer (OR-03)

» Record your official's specific position. Clearly ask your Representative or Senator whether they will support dedicated biking and walking funding and local government voices in transportation. Keep track of their answer.

» Take advantage of data about your state and district. Handing your elected official a summary sheet of how biking and walking funds benefit your community can make a lasting impression. If you need help finding facts and figures, contact Caron Whitaker at caron@bikeleague.org.

Follow Up with a Thank You

After the event, thank your elected official and the staff with whom you coordinated.

» Thank both staff and the Senator or Representative. Be sure to both maintain your working relationship with your official's staff and with the official.

» Reiterate the event's success. Discuss why the event was important, what was accomplished, and how the official's presence made a difference.

Send press clips and photos. Press clips or links to positive coverage of the event will demonstrate that the event was worth your elected official's time.

Event Logistics Checklist

This event checklist can help you quickly determine whether you have key tasks handled for your event. This is not meant to be a complete guide, but rather a list of key logistics pertaining to hosting your Member of Congress and/or the media.

Event Logistics

» Timelines developed for the day of the event and the weeks leading up to the event.

» Permissions / permits / involvement obtained for event site from principal, city officials, etc.

» Invitations sent and attendance confirmed.

» Funding agencies, local officials, and local business leaders secured as key guests.

» All physical logistics in place: Podium for speakers, refreshments, decorations, etc.

» All participants know roles, talking points.

» Informational packets prepared for elected official and media.

» Photographer / videographer designated

Member of Congress Logistics

» Scheduler contacted the week before and the day before to confirm the Member's attendance. Scheduler has contact information (including cell phone) for someone at the event.

» List created included key individuals for the Member to meet. Each individual prepared with talking points and background information.

» Member liaison identified, and prepared to:

» Greet Member and make him or her comfortable

» Brief Member on event and its purpose and steer him / her to the individuals identified to talk about the project

» Coordinate with photographer to take photos of the Member at the event

» Provide an information packet and get contact information for the Member's staff

Media Logistics (see "Getting Media Coverage" below)

» Media called the day before the event as a reminder. Press advisory faxed/emailed again.

» Spokesperson identified, and prepared with talking points.

» Media sign-in table or check-in area available

» Staff person assigned to greet media and steer them to the spokesperson and other leaders.

Getting Media Coverage

Careful planning to attract members of the press to your event can make a big difference in drawing attention to your efforts. There are several simple steps you can take to successfully document the day for yourself, too, even if there are no reporters present. After the event, tracking media coverage and reporting back about the event will help biking and walking advocacy on both a local and national level.

Steps to attract reporters

- » Choose a time for your event that's convenient for reporters. Generally, morning events that take place earlier in the week get better coverage.
- » Build a press list of local media outlets and people who cover biking and walking. List press outlets in your district or state — daily newspapers, radio stations, TV stations, community newspapers, and blogs are all important. Compile a list of relevant reporters and keep their email addresses and phone numbers on hand.

- » Write a media advisory that tells editors and reporters the “who, what, when, where, and why” of the event. Keep it to one page, and include logistical details like directions, timing, and (car) parking instructions. Email the advisory two days before the event, and call the editor or reporter to confirm receipt. Resend the advisory the morning of the event, too.

- » Write a press release for distribution at the event. A press release gives a brief account of the event and contains key information about the speakers and organizers. Press releases are generally written in the past tense and quote important stakeholders.

- » Assign a media spokesperson. Prepare this person with talking points about the event. Have a media check-in area and assign someone to steer media to key leaders. This will help you identify who is a reporter and make sure they get the resources they need.

- » Work with your elected official's press secretary. Members of Congress have staff who maintain press lists for these exact purposes. Working with your official's press liaison will help you get more coverage.



Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) speaking at an event for the addition of bicycle and pedestrian facilities on the Livingston Avenue Bridge

Harnessing Social Media

In addition to attracting reporters, sharing your own story via social media can be a powerful way to broadcast and gain new followers in your efforts.

- » Use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to share photos from your event.
- » Consider creating a hashtag for the visit so those following along online have a single hub to keep tabs. (i.e. #BlumenauerBikes or #BlumenauerVisit2014). Let your followers know you'll be using the hashtag during the visit, and encourage others to do the same when posting photos and updates to their social media streams.
- » Find your congressional lawmaker's handles on whichever platforms you plan to post. Nearly all have Twitter and Facebook handles and can be found easily with a Google search. Tag them in your updates.

» Reporters are increasingly engaged on Twitter, and it's a good idea to track down the handles of local reporters before your event. Tweet at them about the visit and consider tagging them in an update on the day of to pique their interest in a follow up story -- or even to request to join your media list.

» After your event, consider doing a social media round up of photos from the day -- share it with your followers and in your next newsletter.

» Not sure where to start with social media? Want more in-depth pointers? The League and the Alliance for Biking & Walking hosted a series on how advocates can harness social media in their work -- read through our resources on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [more](#).



At the National Bike Summit, the League shares a wealth of photos and positive coverage of members of Congress and top administration officials on Facebook and Twitter

What to Document at the Event

Regardless of whether media will be in attendance, be sure to take these simple steps to document your event. Having photos, quotes, and stories about your elected official at a local biking event will help you track your relationship with your elected official and will help the League engage your elected official on key biking and walking legislation.

- » Take plenty of photos of your Senator or Representative with attendees. Photos with constituents on bikes (especially kids) are especially good photos to have on hand. Appointing a staff person or volunteer to take photos will be helpful.
- » Keep a record of your elected official's remarks. Quotes about the benefits of biking and walking in your state or district are great to have on hand.
- » If possible, record video of the event. Recording the event is a great way to show off your efforts and remember what happened.

Track Coverage and Report Back

Save your record of key photos and quotes, track coverage of your event, and let us know what happened. Reporting back to the League will enable us to refer to your event during future campaigns for biking and walking funding.

- » Track coverage of your event by following the news outlets represented at your event. You might also want to set up a Google Alert with key words from your event to catch blog posts and online articles.
- » Keep a record of coverage as you discover it. Compile links, titles, outlet names, reporters, and article text as they emerge.
- » Write a blog. We would like to document successful events and any new best practices/ lessons learned. Please send a write up of the event with your best photos to liz@bikeleague.org. We'll highlight it on our blog.

If you have questions, please don't hesitate to contact Caron Whitaker (caron@bikeleague.org) or Liz Murphy (liz@bikeleague.org).

Thank you!



Rep. Tammy Duckworth (red shirt) (IL-08) riding with the Schaumburg Bicycle Club