

A guide to engaging with civic leaders

The goal of the Blueprint for Better campaign is for architects to have a seat at the table when important civic decisions are made, and for members of our profession to be ready to speak to the value that architects bring to our communities. The collective voice of architects is essential for designing a better future for our cities and our planet. We want to ensure that yours is heard.

As a leader in your community, it is critical for you to be involved and engaged in your community. As an architect, you bring a unique skillset. It is important that you see yourself as a community leader, not just as an architect working on a single project.

This toolkit will teach you to position yourself as a trusted advisor, and as a result, demonstrate the value architects bring to their community.

Learn more about the Blueprint for Better campaign at blueprintforbetter.org.

About this guide

This toolkit will show you how to engage with civic leaders at the local, state, and federal levels to drive real change in your community.

Contacts

If you have additional questions about civic engagement after reading this guide, our team is here to help.

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**“Our society will
improve if architects
exercise more
influence over the
cities in which they
live.”**

– Carl Elefante, FAIA, AIA President 2018

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About the Blueprint for Better campaign

All over the country, architects are working with civic leaders to address the critical issues affecting our cities. This year, AIA is shining a light on some of those important partnerships through the Blueprint for Better campaign.

This campaign seeks to position architects as thought and action leaders who work to enact positive change in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

As part of this campaign, AIA and its members are organizing conversations with civic leaders, participating in thought-leadership conferences, and encouraging architects to tell their stories through the AIA Film Challenge.

Learn more at blueprintforbetter.org.



Civic engagement & the architect's role

What is my role as an architect?

As an architect, you possess very specific skills and training that can be of tremendous value to the future of communities. Architects are most effective when they are involved in critical conversations at the very earliest stages, helping city officials to make smart, informed decisions that can positively affect communities and save taxpayer dollars.

Why should I connect with elected officials and my community?

The more architects connect with civic leaders, the more opportunities we will have to positively influence outcomes, demonstrate value, gain trust, and become trusted advisors for every community project, thereby earning a seat at the table for future conversations.

Architects can make a real difference

In 2011, the Pratt City neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama, was destroyed by a massive tornado. AIA's Regional and Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) mobilized to help plan a recovery strategy. The team toured the community and met with local leaders and residents to discuss how to rebuild. Residents overwhelmingly said they "had a real voice in shaping our community." Due to the community involvement and the expertise and understanding of the architects, the result was a comprehensive roadmap to rebuild a resilient and safe community.



Share your story

Sharing a story that showcases your knowledge, professional education and experience as an architect is one of the most powerful actions you can take as an engaged citizen. According to the Congressional Management Foundation, nearly 80% of legislators agree that sharing a personal story related to a bill or issue is helpful—but only 11% of messages they receive include a constituent's personal story.

STEP 1 : EVALUTATE

To communicate effectively about any issue, carefully answer the following questions:

1. What is your desired outcome?
2. Who is the target audience?
3. What does your audience already know about your issue?
4. What action would you like your audience to take?
5. What specific message will you use to get your audience to take action?
6. How will you deliver your message? Consider both the medium and the messenger.



Share your story

STEP 2 : DEVELOP YOUR MESSAGE

Keep it local

Understand how your idea will benefit the community directly. Tie a local effort to initiatives happening in cities across the country or at the state or federal level.

Keep it manageable

Provide relevant information to the appropriate individuals—not everyone wants to know every particular detail. Show examples of solutions that are working and that your target audience can implement. If you are talking about a goal that is 20 or 50 years away, be sure to include benchmarks to break up the goal into a reasonable timeframe.

Keep it relevant

Communicate, with detail, why your objective should be relevant for your audience. Describe how your efforts will impact their life and what they can do to address the issue. Never criticize or condemn your audience.

Focus on solutions

Share your personal story and connect civic action to solutions in the community.

Be reasonable

Engage your audience. Avoid rhetorical or shrill language that drives people away.

Back up your position

- Use scientific data and cite credible sources
- Show results and share your successes
- Report your results and celebrate architects who are making a difference

Next steps

Thank elected officials for their time and ask for their feedback. Ask “How can I get involved?” and “Will you let me know if anything changes?” Follow up with a thank you email to see if they have questions or additional comments on what was discussed.



Share your story

STEP 3 : GET THE WORD OUT

Social media can be a powerful tool to spread your message far and wide. Here are some tips to leverage it:

1. Highlight unique details

We're all affected by the issues that our legislators are debating—but not always in the same way. Highlight specific ways in which you've been affected by the bill or issue. What makes your story unique? What details would be helpful for your representative to know?

2. Be specific

How is your story related to the bill or issue? Highlight the aspects of your story that are most relevant.

3. Less is more

Don't write a novel; be concise and respectful. Refer to [The Architect's Voice](#) for help in crafting your message.

4. Tap into your network

The more constituents talk about an issue, the more your representative will pay attention. Share your story on social media and encourage others to engage their representatives as well.

Your story can help amplify the impact of the Blueprint for Better campaign when you use the

Sample social media post #1

As an architect, I strongly support [insert relevant issue]. Please #ActivateYourCivicEngagement and join me in encouraging [tag relevant civic leaders] to take action by [insert appropriate action]. #Blueprint forBetter (tag appropriate people, include relevant photos)

Sample social media post #2

[tag relevant civic leaders] please support [insert relevant issue]. Thank you for your hard work on our behalf. #BlueprintForBetter #ActivateYourCivicEngagement (tag appropriate people, include relevant photos)



Take action

Looking for ways to support a candidate or convene a conversation on a critical issue? Here are some effective actions that you can take between now and November:

1. Vote

Find your polling place and make a plan to vote. Also, check out [Ballotpedia](#) to view an up-to-date election calendar. Bring your family and friends with you to the polls and encourage them to get involved as well.

2. Organize a conversation on a timely, local issue

Work with your local AIA component to host a community conversation. Invite local leaders and ask for specific ways architects can get involved. [Find your local chapter.](#)

3. Become a resource for a candidate

Many candidates rely on local professionals to provide expert guidance and information on important issues. Introduce yourself to a candidate and ask how you can help shape their position on a local issue.

4. Support a candidate

Spend some time identifying state-level candidates who are running for office. Help them raise funds by hosting a fundraiser or making a personal contribution. With modern campaign funds, no matter where you live, you can lend your support to candidates across the country.

5. Build the candidate pipeline

Identify emerging leaders in your local community, school board, or firm, and encourage them to run for elected office.



Locate your civic leaders

Find out who represents you at the federal, state, and local level.

FEDERAL	
HOUSE*	SENATE*
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 435 voting members• small staff (15 avg) and budget• “power of the purse” and powers of impeachment• serve 2-year terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 100 voting members• large staff (40 avg) and budget• presidential appointments, treaties• serve 6-year terms

*Click “house” and “senate” to discover who represents you.

STATE *
State House
State Senate
State Governorship
<p>* All 50 states have a governor and nearly all states have both a senate and house (except Nebraska). They may call them different things—General Assembly can be both, State Assembly = State House in some cases. The number of seats varies from 49 in Nebraska to 424 in New Hampshire. Session lengths vary from 30 days to year-round. Terms can be two or four years depending on state and what chamber. Staff capacity varies widely based on funding and responsibilities vary widely by state and typically include budget (capital development projects) and licensing. The governor appoints licensing boards as well as oversees administrative rules.</p> <p>Elected officials will often host community meetings in the interim. These are good opportunities to meet representatives and senators.</p>

CITY
Mayor/County Supervisor
City Council/County Board
City Manager



Resources

Architects and civic leaders have many shared objectives and goals. By connecting, you can work together to achieve them.

Ways to engage with elected officials:

1. Call
2. Write a letter
3. Write an op-ed
4. Engage in person

1. CALL

The most important part of making a phone call to an elected officials is to be clear on what issue you're calling about. Why you support or oppose certain legislation is irrelevant. The more people that call the representative's office, the less detail the assistants will write down. Getting straight to the point makes things easier for everyone – including those who are waiting for their phone calls to be picked up.

Additionally, tools like [5 Calls](#) can help. You just need to provide your zip code, select the issue that you care about, and 5 Calls will provide a script.

Guide to calling elected officials:

1. State your name and address
2. State your reason for calling
3. Tell your story
4. Ask your elected official to take a specific action
5. Wait for their response

SAMPLE PHONE SCRIPT

"Hello, my name is Jane Smith. I'm a constituent from Fairfax, VA and an architect, zip code 22030. I am calling to oppose/support the passing of the Sustainable Buildings Act and I strongly encourage the Senator to please support this legislation. Thank you for your hard work!"



Resources cont.

2. WRITE AN OP-ED

A letter to the editor can be a powerful way to gain media exposure for key issues. Below is a template for a letter to the editor. We encourage you to customize it to meet your needs.

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

[Date]

Letter to the Editor

[Insert contact information here]

Dear [editor's name],

As [insert city name] continues to build and expand, it's critically important for architects to be involved from the very beginning when new projects are planned. [insert local project name here] is a prime example. Due to the architect's key early role [insert example of positive project outcome, benefits to the community or financial savings here].

All over the US, architects are working with mayors and other civic leaders to take on critical issues facing our cities, like [insert any additional issues of local relevance], rising water, natural disasters, sustainability, and housing shortages. Including right here in [insert city name].

As an architect and a resident of [insert city name], I stand ready to work with civic leaders and our partner industries to make [insert city name] a great place to live and work, both today and for future generations.

Sincerely,

[X]

[Title]

[Contact information (phone, email)]



Resources cont.

3. WRITE A LETTER

A letter or email to a civic leader can be an effective way to introduce yourself, request a specific action, or ask for a meeting. Below is a template for a letter to a civic leader. We encourage you to customize it to meet your needs.

SAMPLE LETTER TO CIVIC LEADER

[Date]

[Insert contact information here]

Dear [civic leader],

As [civic leader's title], you are critically invested in [city name]'s continued success and prosperity. As you consider new projects [OR specific project], I believe you will see enormous benefits from involving the architectural community at the earliest planning stages.

Just as we serve as trusted advisors when working on buildings, architects can be trusted advisors for the future of [city or state]. Through our unique skills and training, we have the ability to anticipate potential future issues and take proactive steps to address them.

All over the US, architects are working with [civic leader's title]s like you to take on critical issues facing our cities, like [insert issues of local relevance], rising water, natural disasters, sustainability, and housing shortages.

As an architect and a resident of [insert city name], I care deeply about my community, and I want to work with you to help our city reach its full potential. Let me know when you might have time to discuss [local project/initiative here]. I believe my skills and experience can be of great value.

I stand ready to work with you and other civic leaders to create a blueprint for better and make [insert city name] a great place to live and work, both today and for future generations.

Sincerely,

[X]

[Title]

[Contact information (phone, email)]



Resources cont.

4. ENGAGE IN PERSON

When engaging with civic leaders, it's important to be prepared with key ideas you want to express. Below are a few discussion points on the value of working with architects.

TALKING POINTS

- Involving architects early in project development offers tremendous benefits in the form of cost savings, the building's harmony with the existing community, and improved usability of the space.
- Architects are the perfect partners to bring a mayor's vision of a city to life. Mayors are described as the chief designers of their city. Architects have the professional skill and experience to turn an idea into a lasting legacy.
- Due to their unique skills and training, architects have the ability to anticipate potential future issues that can affect our cities and take proactive steps to address them.
- Architects are known as trusted advisors on buildings, but did you know that all over the US, architects are working with mayors and other civic leaders to take on critical issues facing our cities, like rising water, natural disasters, sustainability, and housing shortages?
- Architects partner with community leaders to hold community meetings so they can better understand people's needs. They then use that input to design better structures and spaces that meet those needs more effectively.

