

15 Questions on Being an Effective Preservation Advocate

1. Do I understand the background?

Before speaking out regarding a preservation concern, it is important to understand all of the background on how the situation arose. Prior meetings, prior plans, city ordinances, state laws, federal laws, local regulations, various organizations and individuals have all brought this preservation concern to the present day. Investigating the background is essential so that you can speak with a deep understanding of how best to move forward and so that you understand all of the players, personalities and interests. Spending the time to investigate the how and why will be worth the effort.

2. Do I understand the decision-making process?

Now, that you've investigated the background, it is important to understand the step-by-step process for what happens next. Who are all the organizations and individuals involved in the decision-making process from here? These might be local officials such as elected officials or local boards and commissions such as the historical commission, planning board or zoning board of appeals. Will public hearings, local approvals and permits be needed?

3. Did I or can I participate in the planning process?

Was a relevant plan such as a master plan, downtown revitalization plan, economic development plan or community preservation plan recently prepared? Were you part of that discussion? Does the proposed project meet the goals of that plan? If there is an upcoming plan being prepared, are you ready to participate in the development of that plan so that your concerns, recommendations and goals can be incorporated into the community's plan.

4. Am I bringing realistic solutions with me?

Showing up to meetings with realistic goals, ideas and compromises can go a long way to building success. Bring your solutions, not your sarcasm.

5. Am I being patient?

Preservationists aren't always known for being patient. After all, when a historic building is threatened, it could disappear by tomorrow. Time is short. Ideally, preservation advocates have already participated in relevant planning processes, understand the background, the decision-making process and have developed a broad constituency. When that is the case, it is far easier to be patient. If you are trying to be a last-minute preservation advocate, it is still important to practice patience. Recognize and accept that you've arrived late and will simply be less effective. With that in mind, it is important to be patient with yourself and what you can accomplish.

6. Am I asking questions and listening?

It is best to calmly acknowledge those that do not share the same views as yourself, hear them out and let them know you heard what they had to say. To be an effective advocate, it is not

about convincing anyone that you are right and they are wrong. By truly listening, you have the opportunity to seek common ground with a diversity of viewpoints.

7. Am I staying positive, respectful and enthusiastic?

While advocating for historic resources can have many challenges along the way, staying positive and enthusiastic will encourage more people to join you. Additionally, it is important that you, as an advocate, find ways to feel the enthusiasm, excitement and energy of building preservation momentum. This may mean coming up with some easily achievable goals, fun activities and finding the humor along the way.

8. Am I seeking common ground?

The solo adversarial approach is unlikely to be effective. Are you reaching out, talking constructively and respectfully with those that you disagree? Are you assuming good intent? Bringing in more tax revenue, having more soccer fields, keeping taxes low, making money, building more housing can all be laudable goals. Are there ways that stakeholders can have win-win solutions?

9. Do I understand the need to build a constituency?

As a preservation advocate, it is important to not address your local officials alone. Bring a group of preservation constituents with you. If you don't have preservation constituents to bring with you, focus on building your grassroots preservation constituency first. Then, go meet with your local officials.

10. Am I building relationships and bridges?

People support what they help create. Be the bridge that brings together diverse viewpoints. Bring residents, neighbors, elected officials and business owners together so that everyone has a voice and interest in protecting what is best about their community.

11. Am I targeting my outreach?

By understanding the background, the organizations, the individuals involved and by listening to all the various stakeholders, outreach can be personal and custom designed to specific needs.

12. Am I keeping my message simple?

Preservation terminology and acronyms may make sense to you and other preservation advocates. However, the words you choose may not be well understood elsewhere. Trying to keep your communication simple and in plain language will achieve an effective message.

13. Have I formed a preservation organization?

Having a local preservation advocacy non-profit organization or even just a simple friends group can elevate your message. Either way, choose a name for your group that is specific enough to the issues at hand but adaptable enough to last beyond an immediate need. From there, consider a logo, electronic communication through social media as well as stickers, magnets, pens and other methods that get your organization noticed.

14. Can I accept setbacks and move on?

This is not easy work. Setbacks in preservation are common but long term, the benefits, successes and rewards will be there.

15. Have I thanked others and shared the credit for success?

A person's greatest emotional need is to feel appreciated. Recognize the value of each individual, even if their contribution was small. Importantly, find ways to recognize and thank your local politicians when there is a success.

Created by Chris Skelly, Massachusetts Historical Commission and shared with permission.
April, 2020