

A Beginner's Guide to RPA Day on the Hill

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Introduction

One of the most productive and gratifying aspects of being a member of RPA's Council of Representatives is the RPA Day on The Hill event, held every spring, in which council representatives and board members meet directly with members of Congress and their staffers to discuss issues important to RPA and its members, and advocate for a Connected America. But for those who have never done it before, the prospect can be quite intimidating. Although it may seem quite daunting, with a bit of preparation, it's an enjoyable and relatively stress-free experience.

I've written this guide with first-timers in mind, although others may also find it useful. It's divided into three sections, giving suggestions of how to prepare before the meetings, how to handle the meetings themselves, and how-to follow-up after the meetings.

Please note that this is just one council member's approach, and that other council members you talk to may have somewhat different approaches.

Preparation

This is the most important part, and the best way to ensure a smooth, stress-free set of meetings. Doing your homework, as it were, will make the rest seem easy. I've found these steps to be quite helpful.

1. **Team up:** Find out if there are other council members from your state or region who are planning to attend, and combine your efforts. If you can "ride along" with someone who has done it before, you'll quickly start to get a good idea of how it's done. And these meetings are easier when you've got someone else with you. RPA's website has a directory of fellow council representatives with their contact information; start there.
2. **Know your state's delegation:** As a RPA council member, you've been elected to represent your entire state. As such, you (and, if you're from a larger state, your fellow council members) will want to meet with as many members of the state's delegation as possible, rather than just your Representative and Senators. So, take a moment to find out who they are. It's also helpful to know if they're on any relevant committees, such as the transportation/infrastructure committee. It's critical to learn where their offices are, as there are three different House buildings and three Senate buildings, and it can take some time to get from one to another; this information will prove useful when scheduling your meetings. Which brings us to....
3. **Schedule your own meetings:** The purpose of our meetings with Congress and congressional staffers is to build an ongoing relationship, not simply to meet and discuss issues briefly on one day per year. View the scheduling as the first step in building that relationship. And the farther in advance you schedule your meetings, the better. This will give you more flexibility to give yourself a manageable meeting schedule, and will also give you a better chance of having your meeting request accepted. (They usually are, but occasionally a member will decline the meeting request.)
 - a. If you're from a larger state with multiple council members, be sure to coordinate with those other members to ensure that nobody's double-booking meetings. Divide up the work and decide who will schedule the meetings, who will meet with whom – whether

you're going to go to the meetings as a group or split up, for example – and keep one another in the loop. For states with large (Congressional and RPA) delegations, this can be a bit of a challenge, so communication is key. For larger delegations where you don't have time to see everyone, prioritize the Senators, the House members of which each of your state's council members is a constituent, and any member who's on a committee.

- b. Start by calling each Representative or Senator's D.C. office. Identify yourself as being with the Rail Passengers Association, and ask for contact info for the Senator or Representative's scheduler. This will probably be an e-mail address, but may be a phone number. Thank them for the information.
- c. Contact the scheduler to request a meeting with the Senator/Representative or her/his staffer in charge of transportation and infrastructure issues. You'll probably get a staffer, rather than the member, and that's okay. Here's an example script I've used:

[Title/Name of Scheduler]:

My name is _____, and I'm a member of the Council of Representatives of the Rail Passengers Association. [If contacting the office of a Senator or the Representative from *your* congressional district, add that you are a constituent. This matters to them.] On [date], RPA will be holding its annual Day on the Hill advocacy event, and I would like to meet briefly with [Senator/Representative _____] or [her/his] staffer in charge of transportation and infrastructure to discuss passenger rail issues important to the [state/commonwealth]. Please contact me at your convenience at [phone#] or [e-mail] to set up a time to meet.

RPA would also like to invite [Senator/Representative _____] and [her/his] staffers to our evening reception [with date and time details provided by RPA.]

I appreciate your assistance, and look forward to meeting with [Senator/Representative _____]

Sincerely,

[your name]

RPA Council of Representatives, [your state]

- d. If the scheduler responds and offers meeting times, be careful to coordinate your meetings so that you can make them on time. Each building has a security checkpoint you must clear, so you need to allow time for that. Once you've cleared security on one side (House vs. Senate), you can get to other buildings on that side via underground connectors without having to clear security again. (These connectors can be a bit difficult to find; go to the basement and follow the signs there; don't be afraid to ask someone for directions.) But to get from the House side to the Senate side or vice versa, you must clear security again.

The House and Senate sides are on opposite sides of the Capitol Building, so you need to allow time for that, too. As a rule of thumb, I'd suggest allowing at least fifteen minutes to get from one meeting to the next on the same side, and at least 45 minutes to get from the House to the Senate side or vice versa. This is where knowing where each member's office is located comes in handy. You can save yourself a lot of trouble if you cluster your meetings based on location.

- e. If the scheduler responds declining your meeting request, thank them (and the member) anyway, and offer to send them information about RPA's issues. The RPA office will provide you with this information.
 - f. How much time should you allow for each meeting? I'd suggest allowing at least fifteen or twenty minutes to meet, but in my experience, most of the meetings only last about five or ten. This doesn't include time getting from one office to the next.
4. **Send RPA your meeting schedule:** Once you have your meetings scheduled, contact the RPA office and give them an outline of your meeting schedule. RPA's goal is to touch as many congressional offices as possible, and keeping the main office abreast of your schedule helps them keep a running tab. They also publish the schedules to other council representatives, to facilitate the "teaming up" I talked about earlier.
 5. **Know the issues:** This may seem like one of the more daunting aspects of your preparation, but don't worry: the first day of the Spring Advocacy Meeting is dedicated to educating you about what RPA's areas of focus are this year. Still, because RPA's overall focus is national, it behooves you to do a bit of homework and learn about issues that are important to *your* state and region. Also learn how your state's Representatives and Senators voted on issues important to RPA (and to you) so that you can thank them when they've voted for our agenda. RPA usually also sets up a web page with details of each year's advocacy priorities.

Meeting Day

You've scheduled up your meetings; you've attended the first day of the Spring Conference, in which RPA leadership has briefed you on our focal points for this year; now it's time to actually go out there and meet. Here are some pointers to help ensure a smooth day.

1. **Dress professionally:** This may seem to go without saying, but it's worth repeating. Congress is a very traditional entity, so traditional attire is appropriate: Suit and tie for men, business suit or skirt-and-blouse for women. Now isn't the time to wear your vintage conductor's uniform. Dress as you would for an important job interview, and you'll be just fine. And don't forget your RPA lapel pin.
2. **Be on time:** Better yet, be early. Congresspersons and their staffers are very busy, so be respectful of their time. That starts with punctuality. Better for you to wait for them than for them to wait for you.
3. **Be yourself, and be calm:** This is important. Congress people and their staffers are used to slick lobbyists. You're not one of those, and that's okay. In fact, they'll probably find it refreshing. So be sure to let them know that you're not a lobbyist, but *a citizen advocate* (and, where appropriate, *a constituent*). I typically point out that I'm there "on my own time and my own dime," and this matters to many members and staffers. It also doesn't hurt to mention that yours is an *elected* position. During your meeting, you may get asked questions you don't know the answers to, and you may stumble on your words a bit. This is okay. See "Be honest," below.
4. **Be brief:** Once again, it's important to be respectful of the member or staffer's time. Discuss the issues at a high level, trying not to get too bogged down in the details. If they're eager to discuss an issue in detail, by all means, do so. But apart from that, keep it simple, and offer to follow up later with additional information. RPA will provide you with info sheets to hand out. Offer these,

or offer to send them via e-mail. The latter is often appreciated. Be sure to briefly cover both RPA's focal points and, where appropriate, your local rail-related issues. The local issues will generally get more attention from the member.

5. **Be respectful:** You may encounter a member or staffer who is *not* supportive of RPA's agenda. View this as an opportunity to build bridges rather than to argue. Indicate that you respect their views and their position, and briefly explain why the issues are important to us; tell them you hope to find some areas of agreement.
6. **Be non-partisan:** This is critical. RPA is a 501(c)3 organization, which prevents it from engaging in any partisan politics. You are acting as a representative of RPA, which means you're bound by the same rules while doing these meetings. You can (and should) advocate passionately for issues, but you may *not* advocate for or against specific parties or candidates. And you may find yourself surprised: the party label does not necessarily indicate whether, or not, a member is supportive of RPA's agenda. There are allies to be found in unexpected places. The broader the coalition we can build, the better.
7. **Be honest:** If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so. If you're asked about something with which you're unfamiliar, tell them that you'll look into it further and get back to them. Then be sure to actually do so. RPA staff will be happy to help with this.
8. **Ask questions:** Specifically, ask the member or staffer if there's anything *they* need from *us*. What can we do to help them help us? Relationships are a two-way street, and this is a good chance to initiate that.
9. **Take notes:** Don't rely on your memory. If a member or staffer asks for additional information, or you hear or learn anything that you want to look into further, make a note of it so you'll remember to follow up later.
10. **Thank them:** Be sure to thank the member or staffer for taking the time to meet with you. A simple thank you goes a long way. And if they've voted in support of RPA's agenda, be sure to thank them for that, too. This is also a good time to verbally invite them to RPA's evening reception. (RPA will provide you with invitation cards for this.)

You may find yourself with down time between meetings. If this is the case, there are a couple of productive uses for this time. You could research issues you made notes to follow up on. You could also stop by the offices of members who declined your meeting requests or whose schedulers did not respond. It's possible you might get an *ad hoc* meeting, and even if not, you can drop off the info sheets that RPA has provided. You might also check the schedules that RPA has provided and ask to "ride along" with another council member, even if it's not from your state, just to see how others approach their meetings.

Post-Meeting

Now the meetings are over, and you've made it through the hard part. You're done, right? Not quite! What happens next?

1. **Report back to RPA:** Let RPA staff know about your meetings after the fact, as well as who ultimately declined your meeting requests. Let them know how the meetings went, whether the

members/staffers were supportive, and *especially* if the member or staffer requested anything *from* RPA.

2. **Follow up:** As soon as you can, send an e-mail to the member and/or staffer, thanking them again for taking the time to meet with you. If they requested any further information from you, reiterate that you'll look into it as soon as you can and get back to them, and then do so.
3. **Keep following up:** As issues of interest come up (e.g., when RPA sends out an action alert), contact the person or persons with whom you met directly, rather than sending a simple form letter. This is *far* more effective, and helps build the relationship. You want them to recognize your name, and to think of you when rail issues come up. If no such issues come up, it's still a good idea to periodically contact them – not too often, perhaps once per quarter – asking them if there are any issues of interest where you and RPA could be of assistance.
4. **Schedule a local meeting:** Every Senator and Representative has at least one local office somewhere within the state or district they represent. Some of them have several such offices. Meeting with your member or their staffer in their local office reminds them that you're a constituent and helps solidify the relationship, as well as emphasizing the importance of our issues. So, if it's possible for you, this is a great way to maximize your impact.