

POLICY ISSUES FOR ASSOCIATIONS: TIME TO TAKE A STAND?



BY TIM EBNER / APR 20, 2020

(Martin Barraud/Getty Images)

Whether you're choosing when to speak on a core policy issue or deciding whether to jump into the fray on a new one, careful planning, collaboration with leaders, and input from members are critical to good advocacy messaging. As public policy takes center stage in an election year, it's a good time to reexamine how your organization decides when to take a stand.

The American Planning Association (APA) had been engaged with the issue of climate change for more than a decade when the policy landscape shifted dramatically last fall. In November, President Trump announced that his administration was setting the wheels in motion to make good on his campaign promise to withdraw from the 2015 Paris climate agreement.

The president's move was widely expected, and perhaps it's no surprise that an organization of professional planners was ready for it. Just eight days after the administration's announcement, APA issued a statement urging reversal of the decision and committing to "continue to advocate for essential and effective climate

policies at all levels of government and to provide the information and resources to ensure that planners are helping create safe communities for all.”

APA Policy Director Jason Jordan credits good preparation and collaboration with a key group of APA leaders for putting the organization in a position to speak with a unified voice on behalf of more than 40,000 members—who work in varied disciplines including land use, transportation, natural resource management, and public health and safety—when the pivotal moment came.



American Planning Association Policy Director Jason Jordan. (Jonathan Timmes)

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“Addressing climate change head-on, we felt, was very consistent with values that underlie the work planners do,” Jordan says. “We have a long history of working on environmental regulatory matters and protecting communities from natural disasters, but there was also a value we can give to the issue. Our work links directly to climate issues that are now higher on the political radar.”

In cases like APA’s, the key question is timing: When is the right moment to speak on a policy issue directly in your wheelhouse—especially when it’s evolving rapidly and requires stepping into a highly divisive political debate? In other cases, an association’s leadership team may be under pressure to take a stand on a new issue that falls outside of traditional industry- related public policy.

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Amy Showalter, principal of the Showalter Group, Inc., a government relations consultancy, says answering those questions takes coordinated action.

“You need a process for dealing with any of these extracurricular issues, and I find that it’s usually a neglected part of board strategy,” she says. “There’s no written outline that defines the exact people and steps needed to answer one question: What happens when we’ve got a new issue coming right at us?”

THE TIMING QUESTION

In the age of the 24/7 news cycle, when an organization chooses to speak can have a big impact on the effectiveness of the message. Jordan says APA’s decision to move came after months of careful media monitoring.

Long before the November announcement, the president made repeated [tweets](#) and [statements](#) about the planned withdrawal from the Paris agreement. But Jordan says any of those would have been the wrong time

to speak.

“It’s very tempting to respond to rhetoric and tweets,” he says. “But it’s important to ensure that the policy reality is matching to whatever social media frenzy is happening. You don’t want to jump into things too quickly.”

Instead, APA seeded the ground with messages and member engagement at the local and state levels, where climate change goals and greenhouse gas emissions targets were already being set. Meanwhile, Jordan and his team were drafting a rapid-response plan so that APA could move quickly the moment the administration began the withdrawal process.

“We tried very hard to put in place a flexible plan, because sometimes things come out on a Friday, and you need a response by Monday morning,” Jordan says. “There isn’t time for three weeks of committee work, so you need to clearly define who will be involved.”

APA’s plan involved a few key decisionmakers: its CEO, board president, chair of the Legislative and Policy Committee, and chief communications officer, in addition to Jordan.

“You need a nimble enough process that allows members to influence the [plan] too,” Jordan says. “So, if a rank-and-file or leading member of the organization wakes up on Monday and sees your statement, they don’t think it came out of some black box at headquarters.”

And sometimes, Showalter says, the right move is to say nothing at all.

“It’s OK to say, ‘We’re not going to move right away because it’s an issue that’s too hot or controlled by the online mob,’” she says. “But you need to be on the ball and track the issue, so it doesn’t get ahead of you.”

Member Input The most essential question Showalter advises association leaders to ask is simple: Does this issue matter to members? And if it seems obvious, that doesn’t make it any less important, says Tommy Goodwin, CAE, government relations manager at the Project Management Institute.

“Every one of an association’s positions or political stances should come from a set of policy priorities filtered through the membership and approved by the board,” he says. “They should also be intentionally broad in scope to help you manage any emerging issue that may come up quickly.”

When you don’t know where your members fall on an issue, Goodwin suggests seeking out sources of member feedback to guide the policy decision-making process. This might include reaching out to chapter leaders or volunteer committees or reviewing hard data from a recent member survey.

“You need to have the right survey methodology to winnow that information out of members because there could be bias built into an issue,” Showalter says. “But every association, regardless of size or scope, needs to

find ways to listen to its members as part of an open and transparent process.”

Putting an ear to the ground can also help identify future disruptions that may turn into the next big policy issue. Nate Smith, vice president of government relations at the American Traffic Safety Services Association, says one issue that could affect his industry in the next 50 years is the self-driving car.

“Our industry might look very different with the advent of a fully deployed fleet of connected and automated vehicles,” Smith says. “You might not need some of the roadside hardware and safety devices that exist today. But that’s an evolving conversation we’re having, and eventually it may result in new policy positions.”

To keep up with the rate of change in their industry or profession, Showalter says, associations will need to engage in future-focused conversations with members or invest in research that analyzes a variety of forces on the horizon.

“Go on a fact-finding mission even if you’re sitting back” on an issue for now, she says. “I think the most successful advocacy leaders are those who stay one step ahead.”
