

Clout Counts!

Ten tips for environmental activists

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Committee for Green Foothills is often recognized as “having clout” in both San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. Gaining such clout on environmental issues does not derive from the influence of money and sheer power (as it might in other arenas), but through smart persistence, honesty, and earning the support of the public.

Over the years as the Committee’s Legislative Advocate in San Mateo County since 1978, I’ve followed ten guidelines that have served me well and may be useful to other activists interested in developing their own clout on environmental issues.

1. **Learn everything possible about your topic**—*knowledge is power*. Seek out others who know the lay of the land, read all the resource documents you can find, and become an expert on your topic.
2. **Discover the decision-making process**—*and find the most advantageous and strategic ways to influence those decisions*. Determine who your allies are or might be -- make connections, and empower others to use the knowledge about both the topic and the process. Knowledgeable allies increase your clout tremendously.
3. **Study everything you can about the decision makers**—*find out what their jobs involve and what is important to them*. Learn something about all the other concerns they must consider, and use this information in crafting your arguments.
4. **Develop relationships with key people**—*lasting success on environmental issues depends upon good relationships*. Building trust with others gives you a huge advantage. If trust isn't possible, respect will sometimes suffice.
5. **Never lie or mislead anyone**—*if you do inadvertently use wrong information, fess up to your errors right away*. Nothing will undermine your credibility more quickly than a lie. In this category I include letting others you are working with know when you have disagreements, and if necessary, agree to disagree.

6. **Do not attack others personally**—even with the most vexatious opponents, you can - and should - strongly argue against ideas, but do not personalize your differences. When I am attacked personally (and that happens!) I always consider the source. The problem is nearly always with the individual attacker, and there is usually nothing I can do about it. Yes, it is often painful, but let it go. And remember that the more attention you call to an opponent's arguments, the more power you yield to him or her.
7. **Keep your eye on the goal**—*don't get distracted or waylaid*. The effort may take many years, but define your goal early and continue to pursue it. Don't let the small stuff overtake the big picture. This will pay off!
8. **Remain civil, and don't burn bridges**—*you would be amazed at how many opponents on one issue become allies on another*. Civility and comity are diminished in today's society, but respectful acknowledging the other side's point of view earns respect for your position.
9. **Focus on the results and recognize everyone**—*work with anyone and everyone you can*. A corollary: acknowledge, celebrate, and thank everyone, genuinely and frequently. Let others bask in the spotlight wherever possible – this is not a business for personal glory.
10. **Above all, maintain your sense of humor**—it helps enormously if you can maintain your perspective. When I despair of a bad decision, my wise husband has a wonderful way of bringing me back to reality. He will say, “Well, what did you expect?” We laugh, and I become reinvigorated to go forth and renew my efforts.

These ten tips are a general guide for developing clout – and good results – as an environmental activist. But most important of all is tenacity. If you suffer a defeat, get ready to come back. Sometimes it takes decades to turn around a recalcitrant agency, as we know from the battle over Montara Mountain and the Devil's Slide Tunnel.

When you do win, keep in mind that environmental victories are often only temporary – but defeats are permanent. You must be ready to stay the course. That's exactly what Committee for Green Foothills has done for the past 43 years. We stand ready for the next 43!