Top 10 Tips

For developing effective grassroots bicycle and pedestrian advocacy organizations

Alliance for Biking & Walking

www.BikeWalkAlliance.org

These recommendations come from the Alliance's many years of experience developing bicycle and pedestrian advocacy organizations and avoiding typical problems. As an advocate, you can overcome common challenges by following these recommendations.

1

Choose board members carefully.

All successful organizations are started by a few dedicated leaders. It is essential to move out of this stage as quickly as possible by bringing in more board members. Choose your board members carefully because one self-serving individual can paralyze the organization. Look for leadership skills (e.g. an ability to compromise, a commitment to the organization, a broad vision), management and/or business experience, and dedication to the success of the organization.

2

Board-elected board.

Write your organization's bylaws so that your board is elected (or appointed) by the board. (The Alliance's online Resource Library has samples.) DO NOT require your membership to elect your board. Members should help with nominations, but only the board knows the skill set needed to complement current board members and will take the time to interview candidates and assess their skills and background. Also, members typically don't want the pressure of choosing board members. A self-perpetuating board, elected by the board, will be better able to avoid selecting the wrong person for the board. And if by chance it still happens, getting that person off the board is much smoother and does not drag the membership into the negative process.

3

Incorporate as a 501(c)(3).

This designation is the only one that will make your organization eligible for most grants and government contracts. It also is the only designation that allows your donors to deduct their donations. Incorporating with any other designation will prevent effective fundraising, which is essential for the organization. The 501(c)(3) status does come with limits on lobbying, but careful management will permit your organization to influence public policy as much as needed. The Alliance for Justice (AllianceForJustice.org) has an easy-to-understand, 12-page booklet that will tell you nearly everything you need to know regarding lobbying for nonprofits.

4

Three achievable campaigns always under way.

Through strategic planning, develop a mission, vision, and goals for your organization with your board. Consider the most pressing needs for improving the bicycling and walking environment in the communities your organization serves. You and your board will come up with a long list. Pick the items that will make the most progress toward your organization's mission and vision. Honestly assess each initiative's fundraising potential and determine the abilities of your staff, board, and volunteers, as well as your organization's administrative infrastructure (e.g. office, phone, computer, database). Then pick the goals that are most achievable with your organizational capacity. You should end up with two that make obvious changes on the ground in the short term, so you can draw new partners and members into your organization through promotion of your success. One campaign should be long term, maybe a legislative agenda or an intensive program like Safe Routes to Schools. These long-term initiatives bring substance to your message and your history in the community. As you achieve these successes, fold in new, achievable campaigns. Each year, create a work plan and budget around these campaigns that guide your staff and board. Attend an Alliance Winning Campaigns Training to learn best practices and key elements to plan, implement, and win your campaigns.

5 Brand your organization.
This starts with choosing your organization's name. Keep it simple and short. Your logo should be simple, too, and and easy to recognize when the image is small. Develop a singlesentence mission statement that all organization leaders can recite easily. Branding goes beyond those identifiers to a persistent message in all of your media and promotional efforts, your newsletter, your website, and every public-speaking opportunity. This message must include your organization's full name (not the acronym) and why it is a valuable and important part of your community's future. Realize that your future partners, members, and donors are in every audience.

6 Your first staff member must be an executive director.
Often, the board of a new organization is tempted to move tentatively into hiring staff. The members have worked hard for the organization's first $20,000 (plenty for hiring someone whose job is to assure the financial stability of the organization), but they are leery of hiring a leader. You cannot afford NOT to hire a leader. Any board that has founded an organization knows all too well the pressures of the day-to-day operations of an effective organization. Administrative staff, or even program staff, will not have this leadership capability in their job description and, if they were hired for these specialty niches, they likely will not have the skills to lead the organization. A staffed organization's day-to-day operations must be led by an executive director, leaving the board free for oversight and governance. Also, offer a minimum of $45,000 per year with benefits. Increase that salary as soon as possible. This is a full-time, executive position, and you must treat it as such.

7 Members and donors are the most dependable and sustainable funding source.
By bringing in members, you build the foundation of your organization and nurture volunteers, new board members, and major donors. Before you seek members, you must first have a system in place for prospecting, recording, thanking, renewing, and keeping track of member dues and donations. Asking for donation without the means of recording those donations or showing appreciation is a critical mistake. With those systems in place, your membership and donor base are sure to grow and become vital funding sources.

8 Each member costs $30 per year.
This is the average cost to request and record members dontations; thank members for those donations; and send membership renewals to your supporters. New volunteer organizations have to do a lot of this work inefficiently, with volunteer time and extra material and postage costs. Established organizations have staff and efficient systems and databases in place to save money. But the cost of the staff and systems still adds up. Memberships should include the entire household. Use incentives like water bottles or shirts for larger contribution levels. Don't ask for less than $30 for your basic membership rate; $35 is better!

9 Foundation grants are low priority.
If you don't have a personal connection to the foundation, you stand little chance of winning a grant. If they are your best buddies, you've only got a 50 percent chance. The time it takes to write the grant and report your results cuts into net value. Foundation grants are usually earmarked, making this funding inflexible to adjust to the needs of your initiatives and programs. When you consider that foundation grants are rarely repeated and therefore are not sustainable funding, you will realize why few of the Alliance's most-effective organizations rely on this source of revenue. Make them part of your fundraising efforts, but only after you have secured more reliable sources.

10 Funding ratios of healthy organizations.
Though members and donors are the best funding source, because they bring good people to your organization with sustainable funding, you must diversify your funding portfolio through your programs and initiatives in order to weather downturns and to increase your organization's influence in your communities. A typical income breakdown for a healthy organization is 1/3 members and donors; 1/3 government contracts and grants; and 1/3 events, rides, and program fees. Note that foundation grants represent an average of less than 7 percent of organizations' budgets.

Contact the Alliance for more information and tips and visit
www.BikeWalkAlliance.org for resources and trainings.