

Tips and tricks for talking to elected officials and decision makers

How to build relationships

Due to the April 2025 special election, this is actually a great time to find and talk to mayoral and city council candidates, along with any seated councilmembers.

Even if it's not your "assigned" councilmember, please introduce yourself to any councilmembers you come across at events, even if it's not "budget season". This is a good time to get to know them and find out what's important to them. By doing this, you can help strengthen ties between legislators and the library commission as a whole. If you make a connection with a councilmember who isn't assigned to you, please inform your Library Commission colleagues who are assigned and make an introduction if they aren't already acquainted.

If talking to a councilmember in an informal setting (library mixer, campaign or community event), focus on getting to know them as a person and understanding their priorities as a legislator. You can use this to tailor your message later, but it's also a good way to build relationships and networks of support for our libraries.

How to schedule your first budget meeting

You can get contact information for your councilmember and their staff from the Oakland City Council website (<https://www.oaklandca.gov/departments/oakland-city-council>), by asking other commissioners, or by emailing Kere at kgonzales@oaklandca.gov.

Once you've gotten in touch, stay in touch. You can keep the conversation going via email, phone or text. It's helpful to check in periodically to stay on their radar if you don't hear back for a while. When communicating via email, it can be helpful to request acknowledgement of receipt, so you can be sure your emails are going to the right place. Keep checking in until you have a meeting scheduled, either with the councilmember or their chief of staff. Don't get discouraged; councilmembers are very busy, their calendars book up quickly, and last-minute schedule changes are sometimes unavoidable.

If this is your first time doing this, you may be surprised at how long it takes to get your first meeting scheduled. It's important to remember that this is rarely due to a lack of support or interest, but due to a cacophony of competing advocates with differing priorities. If you keep in touch and keep following up, you will get your meeting!

How to make the most of a budget meeting

You will eventually get a meeting with the councilmember, mayor, or their chief of staff. If there is enough time in the meeting (30 minutes or more), start by asking a few questions. Ask about their budget priorities and what their considerations are, how they weigh input from advocates and constituents, what are the top priorities within their districts, etc. It's helpful to understand the context and political realities they're operating in.

If there's something you admire about the councilmember--their legislative history or their priorities, or something they did for their district that you appreciated, it's a good idea to bring this up as a way to establish common ground.

In this first phase of the meeting, keep an eye on the time and remember that *you are managing the meeting*. Councilmembers are extremely busy and are counting on you to communicate clearly and provide appropriate context. If you fail to set the stage appropriately, you may find yourself in the position of having to politely interject in order to steer the meeting back on course--or in the worst case--running out of time to get your points across. While it's important to build rapport and provide some context before starting to make your own requests, you must use your best judgment and prepare for the discussion according to the amount of time given.

In promoting the library, pick a few items from the contextual talking points that will resonate with their priorities. Be direct and concise; speak from the heart, but don't ramble, couch or sugarcoat anything. It will help to come prepared with some on-the-ground stories from local branches in the district, in addition to the examples in the talking points. End with the specific list of **asks** from the talking points. Then ask the councilmember or staff if they're willing to make a commitment on each of the specific asks.

If they seem supportive but do not give a clear **yes** to one of our specific asks, be respectful but persistent in requesting they give a clear **yes**. For example, if they say, "I'll do everything I can to support the libraries," you can say, "So, just to be clear, are you committing to appropriating \$14.5 million per year to OPL in the general fund?"

If they are still unable to fully commit after this, (or if they have expressed ambivalence from the beginning of the meeting), try to find out what is causing the ambivalence and make at least one attempt to address it in the meeting using the contextual talking points. For example, if they say, "I want to do this, but I'll need to talk to my staff and figure out where the money's going to come from," you can say, "I understand, and I encourage you and your staff to review the parcel tax measures. If we don't appropriate the full amount, we are putting up to 70% of additional funding at risk." Use data and narratives about library patron or staff experiences if you can.

If their concerns are based on competing budget priorities, this is a good time to talk about how libraries support these priorities. For example, if they feel that they are obligated to support "public safety" above all, you can talk about all the library programs that enhance public safety. If they tell you they might have to choose between libraries and youth programs, you can talk about all the youth programs offered by our libraries. Please note that we are not here to promote OPL funding at the expense of other programs, but we are here as members of an oversight body, tasked with ensuring that the city meet the requirements of our parcel tax measures.

Regardless of the answer given (yes, likely yes, unsure, no), write it down to ensure there are no misunderstandings. If you are unable to address their concerns on the first attempt, there is no need to keep pushing during the meeting. Unless they've given you a definitive "yes" or "no," ask them if they can send you their final response as soon as the mayor's proposed budget is released. This will give you time to respond before council budget proposals are released. If you're meeting with the mayor, ask the mayor if they can respond a week prior to releasing their proposal.

During this time, always be respectful, but persistent. Elected officials are human beings who--like you--care deeply about our city. They are here to listen and respond to all members of the public, and you are here to remind them of the massive public support for our libraries. Always thank them for their time and tell them you look forward to continuing the discussion.

Always follow up within a few days of the meeting with an email thanking them and their staff. If they still have not committed to one or more of our **asks**, this is a good time to remind them what they are and request a commitment as soon as the mayor's proposal is released (or a week before, if you are addressing the mayor). This is also your opportunity to make your case one last time, if they have not fully committed, so send any data, talking points, etc., that you think might make it easier for the councilmember to fully commit.

How to keep the conversation going

One of our **asks** (in 2025) is for Councilmembers and the mayor to commit to meet with their assigned commissioners twice a year, and to forward information we might share with them in the future to their constituents. Our prior experience has been that all councilmembers and prior mayors have been eager to keep the lines of communication open and take time out of their busy schedules to meet with us on occasion. Regardless of how your elected representative or their staff respond to our budget-related asks--it's important that we keep in touch with them even *after budget season is over*.

We recommend that you email your assigned councilmembers once a month, to share happenings at local branches in their district, and ask them to share them in their newsletters or other communications to constituents. Other information you can share with them are OPL-wide events, Library Commission vacancies, OPL jobs or job events, OPL events seniors and youth, and so on.

If your assigned branches are not in your assigned councilmember's district, you can ask your fellow commissioners for the latest, or listen for news during the Advocacy Updates section of our monthly meetings. You can also see a calendar of events and filter by OPL Branch at <https://oaklandlibrary.bibliocommons.com/v2/events>. It takes about 5 minutes to get a list of upcoming events for any branch, and you can just copy and paste this into a quick email to your councilmember.

Depending on context, you can also ask them if they have any questions, or if any of their constituents have brought questions or concerns about OPL to their attention that you can help escalate.

The information shared is less critical than the fact that you are keeping in touch. Everyone loves libraries, but the flip side is that our libraries can be taken for granted. By keeping in regular contact with your assigned councilmembers and the mayor, you're reminding decision makers that libraries are worthy of ongoing attention and support.