

How to Work with Public Officials-

A Guide to Public and Government Relations for Windsurfers



Introduction

Many windsurfers have contact with park or beach authorities, marine police, harbor authorities, and the U.S. Coast Guard concerning important matters. These contacts may be at the municipal, county, state or federal level. In some cases our interaction is with the paid full-time staff of these government bodies. Usually these people will be either a department head or supervisor.

In other cases, our main contact is (or should be) with an elected official such as a Mayor, City Council Member, or a state legislator. In still other cases, people who have the most say over our windsurfing lives are appointed members of a board or commission such as a parks commission, a water authority, or even the board of health. Sometimes several governmental bodies are involved with the same windsurfing question.

The typical problem is to persuade the government to remove some of those burdensome restrictions and to get on with safe windsurfing for the public. Favorable action, if it comes at all, typically takes months.

Efforts may seem futile at first, but not to those who have successfully jumped the hurdle of government bureaucracy. The following text illustrates specific steps by which windsurfers (whether individually or club affiliated) can achieve their ultimate goal by working with government bodies, or at least achieve the best alternative for the general public.

There is no question that the government sector works differently and marches to a different drum than the private sector, generally for good reason. If windsurfers understand why this is, they can swing this fact-of-life around to their own advantage. Usually bullheaded fighting of government officials (which may sometimes work in the private sector) is not productive.

Unfortunately, there aren't any immediate solutions for your intended dealings with any government bodies. Patience, understanding, thorough research to strengthen your position, gaining allies, and the willingness to compromise or seek new solutions will help in this sometimes tedious endeavor and eventually pay off! In other words, you need the classic methods of a good sales negotiator. If you and your associates employ these, you are certainly ahead of the game in getting the government bodies you must work with to see things your way!

The principles of how to successfully deal with government bodies are discussed in the text of this paper.

1. Some appropriate topics of discussion are:
2. Motivators in the Public Sector
3. Special Public Relations Problems for the Windsurfer
4. Special Public Relations Advantages for the Windsurfer
5. Ingredients for a Successful Government/Public Relations Program for boardsailing
6. Ten Summary Steps



Motivators in the Public Sector

Profit, cost reduction, cost effectiveness, tax reduction, and the increase of income are seldom helpful principles in the public sector (although not all public employees will acknowledge this in the form of a personal quote). For example, working out a plan to improve utilization of under used employees can make you some sort of a hero in the private sector. Proposing such a plan in the public sector will most likely get you a lot of glassy stares in the public sector.

So what drums do public sector people march to? Some of the positive motivators are:

- **Increase their amount of public service.** For example, increase the number of beach admissions per year. More budget and more employees generally go along with this.
- **Popular acclaim by their perceived constituencies.** This includes swimmers, boaters, and fishermen. If someone new such as windsurfers or volleyball players wants a piece of whatever benefit (beach or water space for example) that some other sizable group has been accustomed to enjoying, the public sector people will be very skittish about arousing anger in one of their established constituencies. It may even be that the established constituencies have already been clamoring for "more", for example more swimming area fenced off from boaters.
- **Popular acclaim by the media for a well-run operation.** Be "good guys". Look out for the needs, welfare, and safety of the public.

The negative motivators are:

- **Lack of Concern for public interest.** Be sure not to show any lack of concern for public interests before any of their constituencies, bosses, or especially the media. The lack of proper concern for a little old lady and mothers of young children is the kiss of death.
- **Petitions opposed to whatever they are doing is a variation of this.**
- **Fear of injury or lawsuit.**
- **"Get off my back!"** A lot of public employees (as well as private sector) have reasonable comfortable working conditions. Too often, they are unwilling to welcome someone with a great idea that will either make waves or create headaches for them. Why rock the boat? You better have some good reasons as to why this will really help such a public sector person, along the lines of the positive motivators above.

The foregoing list applies primarily to staff employees and elected officials. The motivator for the elected official often relates to the next election. An elected official will frequently ask themselves, "Will doing this help or hurt my chances in the next election?" This is the way a democracy works! It may not be perfect, but has anyone found a better way?

Windsurfers are a small voting population. But they can still win favor from elected officials by:

- Helping to make an elected official look smart and considerate before the public. Any such endeavor will be appreciated and remembered.
- Refraining from making an elected official look less than competent. Avoid any actions that an official would perceive as an attack. Find him/her a graceful way out of any controversy you may have. A compromise will make the public official look good. It will pay off!



Special Public Relations Problems for the Windsurfer

Windsurfers have public relations problems, some justified and some of them not:

- **Worrying swimmers.** Swimmers sometimes feel threatened by windsurfers coming too close. Maybe the swimmer is a nervous "little old lady" who feels jeopardized by a windsurfer 25 yards away. Or, maybe the swimmer was indeed legitimately concerned. "Little old ladies" are political dynamite, as are mothers with children -- there is no way to win out against them. Stay at least 25 yards clear of all swimmers, and flash them your most winning smile so they know you see them and are in control of your board.

If you see other windsurfers worrying swimmers, explain that this has been a quick way to ban windsurfing at beaches in several states.

In defense of windsurfers at a recent Ipswich, Massachusetts town meeting, where a ban on boardsailing from town beaches was being debated, a woman in her 60s apparently turned the tide in our favor. She said, "The people standing on them (sailboards) are cold sober. I wish I could feel so secure about the people in boats where I swim who come through with a can of beer in their hands." This is a good argument to remember.

- **Worrying boaters.** Have you ever cautioned beginners to stay clear of the boating channel, and the first thing they do is get out in the channel and fall in front of a boat, requiring sudden engine reversal or change of course? It happens, and it is disastrous for a windsurfer's image. If you see it apologize to the boater and educate the offender. Except in a rare circumstance such as a formal race, we would be well advised to give way to other boaters with a winning smile so they know you see them and they feel your generosity and responsiveness.

Power boaters are frequently blinded by the sun. On the late afternoon of April 12, 1986, a San Francisco Bay windsurfer's board and rig was run over by a 12-meter tender in the Golden Gate Challenge program. Miraculously, the rider swam out of the way. Even though we may be right, in such a situation, we are going to be labeled "dangerous" by power boaters. This will only bring you one step closer to being banned. Windsurfers need to keep clear in such situations.

- **Windsurfing is relatively new.** A recent letter from a Greenwich, Connecticut windsurfer was published in the local newspaper, complaining about primitive boardsailing conditions in the local town park. In reply, a member of an advisory committee of that park said in effect that in view of already crowded conditions windsurfers should be thankful for what they have.

Some windsurfers are loud and impetuous. They sometimes park poorly, obstruct traffic while unloading, and have loud radios in the parking lot. People take offense to loud music, obstructing traffic while unloading, and at inconsiderate parking.

Officials of any windsurfing organization would be ill-advised to take on the role of policing their own members who may be acting offensively in public, as in poor parking or in loud music. It would seem reasonable that educating is a proper function, but not policing.

Windsurfers are sitting on a powder keg. One major incident, fatality, close call, collision, serious injury or the like, will almost certainly bring out numerous people who have "known all along" that windsurfing is extremely dangerous, and should therefore be banned. In addition to the inherent merits of a safety program, one that is visible to both officials and to the general public will help with this problem. We can't afford the public saying, "I have never seen any evidence that windsurfers care about safety. Most of them refuse to wear life jackets like other boaters, etc., etc."

Special Public Relations Advantages for Windsurfers

- **The public likes to watch boardsailing.** Pedestrians and drivers alike will cause congestion on a waterfront road by stopping to watch us. This may create another slight headache for officials, but we must not let them pin this one on us as a problem of our making. If anything, it attracts, not detracts, people to public facilities.
- **The Windsurfer's Image.** Boardsailing has a good public image, as TV ads using windsurfers often testify. It is healthy, clean, and it can be a marvelous display of grace and skill as the riders tend to be physically fit and clean cut.
- **The Windsurfer's lifestyle.** Readership surveys by boardsailing magazines show that windsurfers on the average are significantly better educated, have higher family incomes, and come more from professional/ managerial work backgrounds than the general population. The advantage of course is that windsurfers, once stirred up, are vocal and can probably do an effective job in winning over the public and government officials to their view. In the above-mentioned attempt at the Ipswich Massachusetts town meeting to ban boardsailing, the local windsurfers handled this well: "Charlie Cobb, a former selectman and windsurfer in his sixties would bring dignity and credibility to the cause; a native-born son would speak in a tongue for the townies; the wife of the chairman of the Finance Committee would aim at the distaff vote...etc."
- **The slogan "We leave nothing behind but our wake" has wide appeal.** No gas/oil slicks, no irritating engine noise, and hopefully no beer cans and trash. The San Francisco Boardsailing Association and the Greenwich Connecticut Boardsailing Association are among many who have held spring cleanup days at the boardsailing beach. It helps the public image (try to get your picture in the local paper), and the government officials cannot deny that you are making a concerted attempt to be helpful citizens. If you are waiting around before the wind comes up, have some plastic shopping bags on hand and get some of the windsurfers into cleaning up trash in the boardsailing area. I used to think windsurfers were not as good about refraining from litter as they might be, until I saw the horrible Monday morning mess at the nearby swimming beach.
- **Positive youth activity.** Is there a town in the United States where some of the teenagers don't complain, "There is nothing to do around here." Stress that boardsailing is another answer to the problem. And also to "Do sports not drugs."
- **Government officials will want to meet with you.** Be accommodating. It surprises those that have not thought about it that oftentimes government supervisors/managers feel a bit isolated from thinking of their various publics. They would usually welcome an occasional general meeting with responsible representatives of windsurfers, such as officers or the steering committee from your local association. They would like to get your input and try out their ideas and complaints on you. And in case some crisis erupts, they will already know who to get in touch with. Hopefully your first meeting will have a chance to build mutual confidence on general matters, not a specific crisis. In one community, both the Chief of Police and the Parks Department Supervisor asked that they be put on the mailing list of the local windsurfers' newsletter.

Ingredients of a Successful Government/Public Relations Program for Windsurfers

Conceptually, government relations and public relations are intertwined. If you have good relations with the public--if they see you as contributing good citizens--the government units should not give you such a hard time. But even if your public image is favorable, it will probably be much to your advantage to go out of your way to know and be on good terms with various government officials who might impact your boardsailing. Here are some ideas.

Don't delude yourself into thinking you can assign public and government relations as a specific task to one of your directors or to one person in your leadership group. It won't work that way. This is the never-ending job of your president and all your officers and other leaders. Building good government and public relations is both an attitude and a way of life in conducting all of your associations' activities. Unfortunately, in a boardsailing group, it cannot be delegated to a specialist.

- **Form a club or association.** If you are using a public beach, membership should be open to all. Your dues can probably be nominal such as \$10 or \$20, possibly less for students. For a lot of good solid specifics on how best to do this, see "How to Form a Windsurfing Club or Organization," which is also available in the US Windsurfing library. This was authored largely by Butch Thomsen of the San Francisco Boardsailing Association, which in its first year probably became the largest boardsailing club in the U.S. and is based on a lot of real-world experience.

The advantages of working through an established group rather than just a few individual sailors are:

1. Government officials will pay more attention to your views if they represent an organized group;
2. You can probably get more attention from the media;
3. As indicated above, government officials will often be delighted to have a responsible body speaking for windsurfers for the interchange of ideas and/or complaints.

In the early stages when your group is tiny, you may or may not want to reveal its size in terms of paid-up members. You may prefer to speak in terms of the size of your mailing list or the size of your constituency. If your governmental unit issues permits for boardsailing, you can probably get a list of permit-holders (for your membership solicitation) from the unit, although you may have to have someone go to the office to copy down the data. You may also be able to exchange lists for this purpose with boardshops, or get them to mail your solicitation to their list if you pay for the mailing and supply them with 555 copies all sealed, stamped, and ready for address labels. (They may not want their list to get into a competitor's hands.) Depending on your community size, several hundred members is much more impressive to officials or the media than several dozen. You can be sure they will ask about your size!

- **Be sure that "safety" and "education" are high among your purposes.** This puts you unassailable on the side of the angels. "Safety," legitimately addressed, is a magic word with public officials. Use it to your advantage, and be sure no one can use it against you by pointing to your lack of safety concern or condoning unsafe practices.

For example, two of the four objectives of the Ocean State Sailboard Association are: "To promote safe sailboard practices statewide," and "To educate newcomers to the sport of boardsailing in an effective and safe manner..." (The other two objectives deal with access and racing.)

A specific instance: At a local beach, the park authorities had actually started to rearrange the windsurfers parking area in a way that would have greatly reduced the number of good parking spaces. The Boardsailing Association officials pointed out a very genuine hazard in the new arrangement caused by parking motorists opening their car doors directly into the path of bicyclists coming up from behind (the area bordered on a bike route). The hazard was legitimate. The Parks Department stopped the new work and replaced the old arrangement.


- **Recruit someone who knows government to be one of your leaders.** Compared to the private sector, government is like the other side of the looking glass. This is not to say it is bad, it is just different -- in ways someone unfamiliar with it would not suspect. Get someone on your board or steering committee that has been in government or who has dealt with them, possibly an attorney with a practice before boards and commissions. Magic rule No. 1 is "Act in the name of safety," magic rule No. 2 is "Get someone on board who knows the territory." One of the California clubs has a member of the local police force as a leader and another California club has the municipal public works director -- how enviable!

What practical effect will this have? Plenty. Insiders know decorum at hearings and how far you can or can't wisely go; they know when it is best to attack an issue at the top or at the bottom; they can learn from the grapevine who is sympathetic and who has his nose out of joint and why; they know their way around the question of whether you should go through staff or through elected/appointed officials -- and if necessary, how to do it without losing their friendliness. (Obviously, someone actually in government may have to keep a low profile in such proceedings - but they can give you the coaching you need.)

Do not overlook your local windsurfing shops as resources and allies on public/government relations matters. You may want to work together with them on some things. The head of a serious windsurfing shop is probably already somewhat of a public/government relations expert and may have good contacts in areas where you don't and vice versa.

Finally, search for windsurfing allies in your state house, legislature, beach commission staff, etc. Unfortunately, there aren't too many high government officials yet who are windsurfers. But quite a few may be big-boat sailors who will give a sympathetic ear to their boardsailing friends. Phone them and ask if you can send them a copy of your newsletter or publication. Ask them to let you know right away if they should hear anything in the wind that might have an impact on boardsailing. In Connecticut, we got an improved sailboard safety act passed in 1983. Many people contributed to the effort but absolutely critical was a big-boat sailor in the legislature with whom we had worked from the beginning and who twice of her own accord informed us of developments in the progress of the bill that were about to lead to disaster. (The following season we gave her our "friend of the year" award.)

- **Consider annual safety campaigns.** This is for the educational benefit of newer windsurfers and as a reminder to the experienced ones, as well as a public/government relations and media benefit.

 Consider an annual "safe boardsailing week" at which you hand out safety reminder flyers at the beach and have them available at the local windsurfing shops. Have one of your association officials present the first such handout to your Mayor, or Chairman of the Parks Commission and get a photograph of the presentation in the newspaper. (Government people, especially elected ones, love to be photographed when they are on the side of the angels. This is especially true in election years.) Be sure to keep flyers from becoming litter. Put an environmental note on the bottom of the flyer and be sure to pick up those you see on the beach or street. Don't let your flyer become an eyesore.

✚ If you should get some unfavorable safety publicity, e.g. rescues or close calls, be ready to renew/revise the safety flyer campaign right away. We cannot afford to have officials or the media ask, "Why was there no safety education?" or "What is being done about all these windsurfer rescues?" The answer should be, there is an on-going active safety education campaign, and it was repeated intensively right after this incident.

✚ Consider having your public officials erect a sign of safety reminders right at your beach. You provide them with the correct wording. It is virtually impossible for a public official to take the responsibility for turning down a request for safety education by a responsible group. (From the point of view of possible lawsuits, you may not want your own group's name on the sign -- let the government guys take the credit.) Nine times out of ten the main five items will be:

Watch out for hypothermia! Watch out for offshore winds! Stay clear of swimmers (& others)! A warning about any special local hazards.

Experienced sailors: Watch for and help others in trouble! (Also post emergency phone number(s).) Such signs now exist at boardsailing beaches on both east and west coasts. Again, get photographed installing the sign with some public official. It is a great way to tell the public that you really care. And we all can use a little reminding!

- **Beach access and PFD regulations.** Securing proper beach access for windsurfers is a whole subject in itself. It is discussed separately in a publication, "Water Access Proposal & Supporting Materials," which is also available from US Windsurfing.
- **Cultivate the media.** Offer interviews to the broadcasters (phone or otherwise), especially when something newsworthy is happening. Or offer a two-minute "featurette" of safety tips at the local windsurfing beach. Have one of your group send off occasional letters to the editor, praising someone if you have nothing else to say. When the newspaper photographer is near your beach, ask him how you can help -- arrange for a couple of your hotshots to do classy jibes right next to shore where he can photograph them.
- **No cheapshots!** Never, never, never in the media or in a public meeting say or imply that a public official or department is stupid, obstinate, etc. Personal attacks or other unduly harsh criticism are absolutely out -- if you want to get best results over the long run. Constructive criticism is OK but always give the other guy a graceful out. For example, try something along these lines: "Our beach commission's policies have worked admirably in the past, but there are now these new conditions which call for more emphasis: etc. etc. etc." Harsh, direct criticism will (a) earn you the direct enmity of the person(s) so criticized so you will get little done as long as that person holds office; they will dig in their heels all the harder; (b) this enmity may go down to the second ranks of the department; (c) other department and government officials will observe your behavior and conclude that these windsurfers aren't the best to do business with.

On the other hand, if you play the game (and it is a great big game and all the public officials know it) with a "we-are-doing-a-great-job-but..." type criticism, you are bound to get smiles of appreciation (possibly secret) from the person being criticized, his subordinates, and other government officials who inevitably will be watching. The other officials will be amused and say that these windsurfers aren't such a bad bunch to do business with after all. Even if you have to introduce a lawsuit, do it with a smile. You may need their help on some different matter a month from now. Notice that this is the same as the conduct of experienced politicians -- they may be strongly opposed to a cohort on one issue, but favor that cohort on the next issue. Such ideas may seem excessively indirect to some, but they are offered based on experience and in the belief that they will get the best results for us windsurfers!

- **Disaster plan.** A local fatality is probably the worst possible stain on the local public and government image of boardsailing. Not only is the tragedy usually needless in itself, it may result in extreme overreaction such as banning boardsailing at all times, even in light-air days in August.

If you will read John Rose's story on Page 42 of the Spring 1987 (Vol. 3, No. 2) California Windsurfer "Inside the Scott Creek Cruncher", you will see the hair-raising story of a guy who really knows the techniques and equipment to effect a rescue in big-surf emergency. What do you do in Class V conditions when there is no possibility of a rescue vessel, no one else around and either you perform the rescue right away or that's it? Do you have the proper gear, the proper training, have you practiced?

Windsurfers in relatively high-hazard areas have thought about this a lot. Fortunately, sailors in these areas are probably better prepared to rescue than most. Some have, or are considering forming, "safety patrols" along the lines of a ski patrol.

You might want to establish a safety patrol or some other appropriate response unit in case of a "ban boardsailing" movement resulting from a tragedy in your locality. All areas become "high hazard" once in a while.

One day a reporter hot on a news story may phone you to break the news of a tragedy: "A windsurfer just drowned at our local beach. I am calling to find out what comments you, as a leader among the local windsurfers, may have". What couple of points should you make?

- **Face-to-face public relations.** Try to set a good example and encourage your fellow sailors also to be sincerely friendly with the public passersby and observers at your beach. Ask them what they think about the sport. Actually tell them what the water temperature is and how protective gear works. Be friendly to the hero-worshipping kids -- if they are watching you rig, explain to them what you are doing. Be especially cordial with older persons -- it is extremely flattering to receive friendly attention. And older persons are a huge political force.

We want these members of the general public to say, "What especially nice people these windsurfers are!" Such friends won't sign petitions against us.




- **The problem of the obstinate boardsailing offender.** Quite possibly there is a small percentage of people in your group who habitually obstruct traffic while unloading, park poorly, have their radios turned up full blast, and do other things that annoy the general public in the vicinity of your beach.

This is a delicate problem for an association official. If you do nothing, the Parks officials, police, and possibly the mayor may receive (public complaints about windsurfers, possibly leading to restrictions. But if you lose your temper and tell the offenders off, you risk alienating a segment of your constituency today, and one that may be among your best sailors and major contributors tomorrow.







Some suggestions:



Discuss the problem with them in a friendly, non-critical way so they see your aim is to avoid restrictions and crackdowns on windsurfers. Explain our own love of good loud rock, but the fact of life that many in the public are offended. Ditto parking so as to overlap two spaces, which may be OK in the morning when the lot is nearly empty, but which annoys the public in the afternoon.

-  Consider developing and placing on the windshield of windsurfing vehicles a "dummy" letter from some irate citizen. Direct it to the mayor, with copies to all the other key officials. Complain about the inconsiderate parking of windsurfers, obstructing traffic, horrible loud music with vulgar lyrics, leaving refuse on the beach -- etc. Everything you can think of. Urge windsurfing be totally banned at once. Then a small paragraph at the end explain that this is a fake letter, but one that very well could be written and might raise a petition for action to restrict us.
-  You will probably want to refrain from acting as a policeman, and tell the offenders that policing others is not our role, we must police ourselves. Explain that you are well aware that in another year or two they may be the best sailors on the beach. Explain in as friendly a way as possible that you are not criticizing, you are only trying to make suggestions that will help us all avoid restrictions.
-  There is always the possibility that the offender has some deep-down need for the attention he is creating. Possibly you need guidance on how best to proceed from someone experienced in handling such problems.

Additional ideas:

-  Leave beer to the individuals: One club used to have a beer keg for occasional barbecues. When the locality began cracking down on underage alcohol consumption, the club decided it had best forego the keg, leaving beer up to individual.
-  Teach government officials to windsurf. If there is a sign of interest, encourage it!
-  Before meeting with a public official for the first time, ask if there is an annual report for his/her department on file and look it up. They will appreciate the interest. Perhaps you can find some community of ideas, or ways that you can be helpful or supportive to what they are trying to do. If you are genuinely interested in some of the departmental programs, ask who you should write to urging full budgetary support for the program. They will appreciate the offer, and perhaps look at you in a more friendly manner.
-  If for some reason you want to present a petition to public officials, do so at a regularly scheduled public meeting of that body. If, for example, you want to petition a Town Council about a Parks Department matter, be sure to let the Parks Department head know ahead of time what you are doing, expressing a preference to work quietly with them if at all possible; be flexible if they want to discuss the issue with you before the Council meets. (Matters can easily be taken off the meeting agenda; re-instate if needed.) Reporters will be at the Town Council meeting, ask them afterward if they need any clarification. Get your matter onto the agenda, don't surprise anyone. Remember, no "cheap shot" criticism in the petition or presentation!
-  In petitioning, don't be "anti" anything, always try to be "pro". For example, you will notice that in Indiana and other states, the committees for sensible PFD legislation were not deemed "Committee against PFDs," but Jim Jordan and his associates named it the "Indiana Sailboard Safety Committee". This works. Try being "pro beach safety" (rather than anti beach closure).
-  In making presentations to public bodies, don't use just expert male windsurfers. Use women and older sailors as spokespersons too. Be careful not to make your presentations overly long

-- take guidance from your steering committee person who is experienced in government matters. Or if you have none, call up ahead of time and ask the chairman how much time you can have.

Consider giving some government official a "friend of the year" award. This only has to be a letter of appreciation. Try to make it a news event. It sounds corny, but it is a nice gesture that will be appreciated. Too often the public shows little appreciation in dealing with public officials. You will get a reputation, not just in the specific department you are dealing with, but through other parts of government too as being "good guys", reasonable to work with, and worth trying to work out some sort of accommodation.

10 Summary Steps



Form a Club. For a lot of good solid specifics on how best to do this, see "How to Form a Windsurfing Club or Organization" in the US Windsurfing library.



Feature genuine concern for safety as one of your goals. "Safety", legitimately addressed, is a magic word!



Recruit a windsurfer as your leader in dealing with public officials. Find someone who has charisma and knows how to play in the political realm.



Consider an annual safety/educational campaign; see specifics in text.



On beach access questions, see separate paper in the library, " Water Access Proposal & Supporting Materials". On PFD question, see "Why PFDs Aren't the Answer to Windsurfing Safety."



Cultivate the media; see specifics in text.



Never take cheap shots at public officials.



Consider in advance a plan of how you will react if a disaster should occur.



Encourage your fellow officers/members to go out of their way to be friendly and open with public passersby, young and old, at your beach.



Be friendly but deal firmly with obstinate windsurfing offenders.