



# Discussion Topic

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A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND TRUST

**As Santa and all his good deeds fade into memory until retailers resurrect him again, there are other benevolent persons standing at your door, poised to knock, but you don't know them yet. They are the new politicians, and like it or not, 2010 is an election year with plenty at stake.**

This year, Michigan voters will select a new governor, a new Secretary of State, a new Attorney General, many new House members and an almost entirely new Senate. Most of them you will not know. But among those who seek to represent you are people who honestly don't know your industry or may not have agriculture's best interests in mind. That's why this election is a crucial one for farming - Michigan's second-largest economic driver.

But it's not just about state elections, said Sarah Black, director of the Public Policy and Commodity Division at Michigan Farm Bureau. No matter the level of politics, building a relationship with the candidate will keep him or her accountable. It's not all that difficult to build relationships, Black said. All it takes is a little effort, a little willingness to open up and an open mind to ensure that elected officials who represent you keeps you and your farm in mind when they vote for or against agriculture's interests.

"From your county commissioner on up, farmers need to get to know their candidates, their families, their businesses and what they stand for," Black said. "Then you need to support them."

The first step, Black said, is to get to know the candidates. Once you are convinced that you've found one who shares your values and priorities, get behind her or him.

"That means supporting the person's campaign," Black said. "Host an event on your farm for the candidate to meet people. That's especially true for local candidates who will remember your support when you need help."

Aside from getting involved in an on-farm event, candidates always appreciate campaign donations, but those things are just the beginning. Continue that relationship as your candidate takes office.

"Make sure when your candidates vote on issues important to you, that you follow up and thank them with a phone call or email," she said. "If your officials voted against your wishes, ask them why. Follow up. That's very important, because you don't want to disappear after the election and take the chance that other, anti-farming messages will turn your candidates' head. You want to become the trusted voice of your industry, and not leave others to sway opinions and votes."

It all boils down to building trust, Black said, and agriculture needs its farmers to be trusted advisors.

"We need to hold our elected officials' feet to the fire, and we can do that by initiating and then following up on the relationships that have been built," Black said. "And there's another benefit to getting to know your elected officials. Politics isn't so mysterious when you get involved, and it's easier to herd in the right direction when you become a well-respected, reasonable voice that's heard often, both in encouragement and criticism."

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### QUESTIONS

1. Surface and list ways your county Farm Bureau could help develop a relationship between farmer members and political candidates.
2. Identify how many different ways you can support a candidate running for public office.
3. List activities or events your county Farm Bureau should consider hosting or participating in to help get "friends of agriculture" elected.