

Committees rule!

Persons learning about the legislative process are often surprised to learn how crucial committees are. The main reason is that no bill can progress to the next committee or to the floor (the entire Senate until it is recommended by the committee(s) to which it is assigned. A bill must get a majority of the committee members' votes or it is dead or stalled. **Committee votes control; they don't just advise!** The implications are staggering.

The Speaker, based upon a bill's subject matter, assigns each bill to a standing committee. Sometimes a "caption bill" is not assigned but held by the speaker for later assignment.

In the House, committee chairs similarly assign bills to subcommittees. The Senate has traditionally not had many subcommittees of substantive importance, although that is changing.

Fiscal impact bills go to a substantive standing committee (like Health or Environment) and then to Finance Committee. When the main topic is taxes or fiscal policy, they just go to Finance.

In the House, the Calendar & Rules committee must approve and schedule for floor action each bill after it emerges from other required committees with a positive action. This committee occasionally holds or kills bills it doesn't like on the merits.

At each of these committees and subcommittees, the bill sponsor appears to speak for and explain the implications of the bill. **Most of the actual discussion and amendment of bills takes places in these committees, not on the House and Senate floor.** At the request of a committee member a non-legislator may be asked to address the committee on the bill.

These committee meetings are open for the public to attend, but are not exactly public hearings in that non-legislators and even legislators not on the committee do not have the "right" to speak. Citizens and/or lobbyists are not given the opportunity to speak unless the sponsor or a committee member requests. Normally, this can be worked out beforehand with the committee chair.

Implications of this committee system for citizen lobbyists and volunteers

Groups seeking to pass or defeat legislation may feel overwhelmed by the task of convincing the whole state legislature of their position. While it is not easy to pass a bill, especially one that means something and is therefore likely to have opposition, it is not impossible. Remember these concrete steps and opportunities.

find an interested sponsor willing to work for the bill

provide the sponsor with good information and fact sheets

be at committee meetings to speak as a resource if asked

(and arrange to be asked beforehand if you and the sponsor think it advisable)

***focus advocacy on the committee, not the whole body**(until the bill gets past committee (s), then broaden the targets)