

THE COMMITTEE PROCESS

If it were not for committees, the Legislature would probably be in session all year. It would take that long for the entire Senate and the entire House of Representatives to scrutinize and take public testimony on every bill. Fortunately, however, the workload in each house is divided among several subunits. These subunits are the standing committees. Their primary role in the legislative process is to thoroughly examine the bills assigned to them and recommend if these bills should become law.

There are thirteen standing committees in each house. In the Senate most committees consist of seven or nine senators. The majority leader, President Pro Tempore, and minority leader select the members of each committee and the chair and vice-chair. In the House, most committees consist of thirteen or fifteen representatives. The Speaker of the House, with advice from the minority leader, picks the members and the chair and vice-chair of the committees. Most legislators are members of two committees. Some serve on more than two committees, but that is often impossible due to the fact that two or three committees are usually meeting at the same time.

From a political standpoint, the composition of each standing committee mirrors the composition of the house as a whole. Say, for example, the Republicans hold a two-thirds majority in the Senate. They would also hold a two-thirds majority in each of the Senate standing committees, and the chair and vice-chair of the committees would likely all be Republicans. The Democrats would not be in the majority on any committee.

Following the introduction and first reading of a bill in either house, the presiding officer assigns it to a committee. The committees are divided by subject matter. Generally speaking, this means all the bills dealing with one subject are assigned to the same committee. For example, there are transportation committees in both houses, which ordinarily receive bills regarding state highways, railroads, aviation, and other topics related to transportation. However, the committee assignment of a particular bill is not always predictable due to the fact that the presiding officers may assign any bill to any committee.

Once a bill is assigned to a committee, the chair decides when the bill will be heard, and the bill is placed on the agenda for that particular meeting. An agenda is prepared for each meeting. It contains not only the date, time, and location of the meeting, but also a list of bills likely to be discussed by the committee at that particular time. By rule, one legislative day must come between the posting of the agenda and the meeting date. This is to give legislators, lobbyists, and other interested parties enough notice so they can be in attendance at the meeting when the bill is acted upon.

The committees in the Senate and the House meet during the morning hours of each legislative day. Some of them meet three times a week, and others meet twice a week. As the legislative session progresses, some of the committees are unable to complete their work within the allotted time and must schedule additional meetings in the evenings. Each committee is staffed by at least one research analyst or fiscal analyst from the Legislative Research Council and a committee secretary.

Committee meetings are open to the public. They are all held in meeting rooms within the State Capitol. Seating is available on a first come, first served basis. When controversial bills such as those dealing with abortion or environmental issues are discussed, meetings usually draw large crowds. At other times, few people are present beyond the committee members and staff. In addition to the meetings being open to the public, the committee minutes are available to anyone desiring them.

Committees usually discuss several bills at each of their meetings. The same general procedure is routinely followed on each bill, though there are extenuating circumstances which might alter it, and the chair is free to run the meeting as he or she sees fit.

First of all, the legislator sponsoring the bill or someone he or she designates presents the bill. This involves explaining the bill and the reason why it was introduced. Following that presentation, the committee generally takes public testimony on the bill. Proponents speak first, then opponents. The testimony comes from a variety of sources. Most often, it comes from lobbyists, or individuals hired to promote the views of a group, organization, or industry on measures considered by the Legislature. Other legislators also sometimes wish to share their views. Finally, it comes from members of the general public. Anyone is free to express an opinion during the committee process whether they are in favor of a bill or against it.

Upon completion of the public testimony, members of the committee discuss the bill. Some committee members ask questions of those who have testified. Others express their opinions on the merit of the bill. Still others offer amendments, or proposed changes, to the bill they think will improve it. At times, amendments are offered which change the bill entirely. These amendments are known as houghouses, and they involve deleting the entire content of the bill following the enacting clause and replacing it with different material.

Next, the committee must make their recommendation on the bill. Below are the recommendations a committee makes.

(1) **DO PASS**, which means the committee recommends the bill pass in its original form.

(2) **DO PASS AMENDED**, which means the committee recommends the bill pass, not in its original form, but in an altered form set out by the committee.

(3) **DO NOT PASS**, which means the committee feels it is important for the bill to be considered by the entire house, but does not recommend its passage.

(4) **WITHOUT RECOMMENDATION**, which means the committee cannot come to a consensus or has no feelings on the bill one way or another, so feels the entire house should determine whether it should pass.

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations, there are other actions a committee can take on a bill. A committee is able to kill a bill, or prevent it from getting any further in the process, in two different ways. First, they can table it, which postpones further discussion on the bill until such time as a majority of members of the committee vote to have it brought up for discussion once again. Secondly, a committee can kill a bill by postponing it to a date that falls after the adjournment date of the legislative session.

Committees must take final action on every bill they are assigned, and that action must be reported to the entire house. All final actions taken on bills by standing committees require a majority vote of the members-elect. This means that a majority of the entire membership of the committee is needed, not just a majority of those present at that particular meeting. If there is unanimous agreement that a certain bill be recommended "do pass" or "do pass amended," and the bill does not require a two-thirds vote for passage, the committee can recommend that the bill be placed on the consent calendar of the particular house. This allows the other members of the house know that the bill passed unanimously and prohibits further discussion on the bill by the entire house unless one of the members feels it is warranted.

Following is a list of the standing committees in both houses and some of the subjects they cover.

Agriculture and Natural Resources

Bills relating to the production and distribution of agricultural products; soil conservation; animals and livestock; the state fair; regulation of grain elevators, pesticide and fertilizer dealers and livestock auctions; weather modification; and brand inspection. Bills relating to game, fish and parks; mining; water development and irrigation; forestry; environmental protection; energy conservation; trespass laws; and nuclear waste disposal.

Appropriations

The general appropriation bill, which contains the budgets of all departments of state government; all bills for special appropriation of state revenues; and bills relating to the appropriation process.

Commerce

Bills relating to insurance; banking; investment; loans and interest; labor; liquor; mercantile transactions; regulation of professions and occupations engaged in commerce; Uniform Commercial Code; OSHA; corporations; property; litter; and minimum wage.

Education

Bills relating to the school districts; the finance, operations, and curriculum of public schools; the teaching profession; special education; higher education; the board of regents; the department of education and cultural affairs; and vocational education.

Government Operations and Audit

Bills relating to legislative auditing and state and local government departments and agencies.

Health and Human Services

Bills relating to health matters; mental illness; drugs; chemical dependency; the aged or disabled; the medical and nursing professions; medical malpractice; welfare assistance; regulation of hospitals and nursing homes; state institutions for the mentally ill, blind, deaf, or retarded; spousal abuse; and abortion.

Judiciary

Bills relating to the courts and court administration; the legal professions; crimes; criminal procedure; law enforcement; personal rights; civil law and procedure; domestic relations; succession and probate; guardianship; administrative procedures; prisons and jails; code commission; and human rights.

Legislative Procedure

Bills relating to legislative procedures; the Legislative Research Council; and basic housekeeping matters during the legislative session.

Local Government

Bills relating to the organization and administration of county, municipal, and township government; special districts; elections; and planning and zoning.

Retirement Laws

Bills relating to the pensions, annuities, and benefits of employees and officers in public service.

State Affairs

Bills relating to the organization of the executive branch of state government; policy decisions of overriding state concern; public employees; worker's compensation; public fiscal administration; veterans and military affairs; the state Legislature; the state constitution; relations with the Indian tribes; the state building authorities and state authorized bonds; and regulation of electrical and telephone utilities. Bills not clearly identified with any other committee or subject area will usually find their way to the State Affairs Committee.

Taxation

Bills relating to the levying and collection of property, sales and other taxes; assessment procedures; mill levies; and classification of property.

Transportation

Bills relating to highways and bridges; motor vehicles; public safety; regulation of motor carriers; traffic ordinances; and licensing.

In addition to the standing committees, there are also select committees, which are generally composed of three members from each house. Select committees are appointed periodically to perform specific tasks such as arranging for a joint session of the Legislature, determining the compensation of legislative employees, or notifying the Governor that the Legislature has completed its work for the year.