

How Committees Work Within the Legislative Process

Idea Developed

A legislator from either the Senate or General Assembly may sponsor a bill individually or at the suggestion of a constituent, interest group, public official or the Governor. The legislator may ask other legislators in the same House to join as co-sponsors.

Bill Drafted

At the legislator's direction, the Office of Legislative Services, a non-partisan agency of the Legislature, provides research and drafting assistance, and prepares the bill in proper technical form.

Bill Introduced

The prime sponsor delivers the bill to the House. Copies of the "proposed" bill are printed. The bill title is read aloud at the next session by the Senate Secretary or General Assembly Clerk. This is the first reading. The bill is made available in electronic form.

Committee Reference

The President of the Senate or Speaker of the General Assembly usually refers the bill to a committee for review, but may send the bill directly to second reading to speed its consideration.

Committee Action

When scheduled by the chair, the committee considers the bill at an open public meeting. The committee may report the bill to the House as is, with amendments, or by a substitute bill. If not considered or reported, the bill remains in committee.

Second Reading

When the bill is reported to the floor (or referred directly without committee review), its title is read aloud for the second reading. The bill can also be amended on the floor at this point.

Third Reading

When scheduled by the President or Speaker, the bill is given a third reading. As it is posted for a vote, members may debate the bill. To ensure thorough consideration, rules prohibit a second and third reading on the same day, except by an emergency vote of three-quarters of the members.

House Vote

A bill passes each House when approved by a majority of the authorized members (21 votes in the Senate, 41 votes in the Assembly).

Second House

When a bill is delivered to the second House, it will go through the same process from first reading and committee referral through final vote. If the second House amends the bill, it is returned to the first House for a vote on the changes. A bill receives final legislative approval only when it passes both Houses in identical form.

Governor's Action

After legislative passage, the bill is sent to the Governor. The Governor may sign it, conditionally veto it (returning it for changes), or veto it absolutely. The Governor may also veto single line items of appropriation bills.

Law

A bill becomes law upon the Governor's signature or after 45 days if no action is taken. If the House of origin is in recess on the 45th day, the time is extended until it reconvenes. (Different rules apply to bills passed during the last 45 days of a two-year session.) If vetoed, a bill can become law if the Legislature overrides the veto by a 2/3 vote. A law takes effect on the day specified in its text or, if unspecified, the next July 4th.

Contacting Your Legislators

Legislators value the opinions and suggestions of their constituents. Through their professionally staffed district offices, legislators respond to requests for information about legislative matters and provide assistance in dealing with State agencies.

To locate your legislator, go to the NJ Legislature's website, www.njleg.state.nj.us or request a free *Roster of Members* by calling the Office of Legislative Services, Legislative Information and Bill Room:

Toll-free in New Jersey: 800-792-8630

TDD line for the hearing impaired:
800-257-7490 (Use TDD equipment only)

E-mail: leginfo@njleg.state.nj.us

You may call or write to legislators at their district offices or:

c/o New Jersey Senate
New Jersey State House
P.O. Box 099,
Trenton, NJ 08625-0099

or

c/o New Jersey General Assembly,
New Jersey State House
P.O. Box 098,
Trenton, NJ 08625-0098



The Office of Legislative Services
Office of Public Information
State House Annex, P.O. Box 068
Trenton, New Jersey 08625-0068



Making Your Voice Heard

Understanding
the Public's Role
in the Legislative
Committee Process



Legislative Committee Structure

The New Jersey Legislature consists of two Houses, a 40-member Senate and an 80-member General Assembly. Each House establishes standing reference committees to consider bills and examine public policy in specific subject areas such as health, human services, environment, education, labor, military and veterans' affairs, and transportation. The Senate and General Assembly also form joint committees with members from both Houses. In a few instances, ad hoc committees may be created, by passing a law or resolution, to address special issues and make recommendations for legislative or administrative action.

The number and scope of committees and their respective membership are established in the rules of the House, and may change in each two-year legislative session.

The presiding officer of the House – the President in the Senate and the Speaker in the General Assembly – appoints committee chairs and committee members from the majority party. The Minority Leader recommends members that represent the minority party. The composition of the membership of the committee reflects that of the House in regard to party affiliation. Legislators are usually appointed to a committee according to their expertise and interest in a particular subject.

The Office of Legislative Services (OLS) and offices of the majority and minority parties assign professional staff to serve as committee aides to provide administrative and research support. Committee aides are key contacts for obtaining information concerning pending committee action and operational protocol.

A list of legislative committees, their members and professional staff aides is available on the Legislature's web site (www.njleg.state.nj.us) or in hard copy.

Committee Action

Much of the discussion on the merits of a bill takes place in committee. The primary functions of a standing committee are to consider bills and

resolutions, and report them to the House; conduct investigations of State departments and agencies; and discern whether an agency's implementation of a law is in accordance with the Legislature's intent.

In considering a bill, a committee may decide to report the bill to the House or take no action. If the bill is reported, it may be advanced with no changes, with amendments, or by a committee substitute bill. All reported bills and resolutions are accompanied by a committee statement that contains a description of the bill's provisions and purpose, the nature of any amendments, and any background information the committee may deem necessary. These statements are convenient sources of information for the public.

If a committee does not report a bill, it remains eligible for committee consideration at another time during the two-year legislative session.

Public Participation

The public may provide input during most committee meetings and public hearings.

A committee meets at the call of the chair on a day and time set aside by the presiding officer. The rules of both Houses require that official committee action be taken in meetings open to the general public and specify notification timelines. Voting to report a bill out of committee requires a quorum of committee members be present.

Committee meetings are generally held on Mondays and Thursdays during regular business hours at the State House Annex in Trenton.

Public hearings may be held anywhere and at any time throughout the state. Bonds, ballot issues and matters that may have Constitutional significance warrant public hearing. No voting or committee action takes place at the time of the hearing. Registration to provide testimony is generally requested well in advance of the hearing.

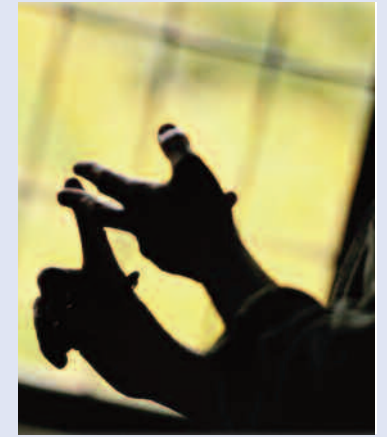
Testimony is recorded and transcribed at the discretion of the committee chair. Live and archived audio records of select meetings are available on the Legislature's web site (www.njleg.state.nj.us).

The *New Jersey Legislative Calendar* lists meeting

Providing Testimony

Legislators are interested in gathering information and insight from parties involved with an issue. Take the following steps to make your testimony as effective as possible:

- **Become informed.** Track the status of proposed legislation on the Legislature's web site (www.njleg.state.nj.us). The web site provides information about the bill history, committee agendas, committee aides, public hearing schedules, and bill sponsorship. If you do not have access to a computer, call the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services, Legislative Information and Bill Room (see contact information below) or your state legislative district office for assistance.
- **Know the issue.** In addition to the original bill or resolution text, be aware of any subsequent amendments or proposed changes. Consider opposing viewpoints and other alternatives, and be prepared to discuss the differences. Make sure that your opinions can be substantiated with as many credible facts as possible.
- **Sign up to be a witness.** The committee chair establishes protocol for public testimony. Witnesses are encouraged to register prior to a public hearing or committee meeting so as to be scheduled in accordance with the chair's preference. In some cases, pre-registration may be mandatory. Contact the committee aide to confirm registration procedures. Generally, registered witnesses are given an opportunity to speak. However, if the issue draws particularly large attendance, the chair may limit the number of witnesses and duration of testimony.
- **Be prepared.** Arrive on time and familiarize yourself with the setting, participants and procedures as they relate to the committee. Be sure to confirm the committee agenda a day before the scheduled meeting. Alert the committee aide in advance concerning any special needs, displays or audio-visual equipment.
- **Presenting testimony.** Provide the committee with written copies of the full text of your testimony. However, your oral presentation should be brief and summarize only key points. Listen to testimony given by others who share your views and try not to repeat their remarks. The most engaging public speakers do not read. Use notes if necessary, but try to maintain eye contact with the committee members. Avoid jargon.
- **Be respectful and courteous.** Public hearings and committee meetings are official proceedings. Refrain from outbursts displaying your support or disapproval.



times, locations and agendas for all scheduled legislative activity, including committee meetings and public hearings. Copies are free of charge from OLS or online. The Legislature's web site reflects the most recent information available.

For further information, call the OLS Legislative Information and Bill Room at 609-292-4840, or toll-free in NJ: 1-800-792-8630. A TDD for the hearing impaired may be reached by calling 609-777-2744, or toll-free in NJ: 1-800-257-7490.