

MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Understanding the Public's Role in the Legislative Committee Process

"Most of the content of this brochure is based on the publication Making Your Voice Heard; Understanding the Public's Role in the Legislative Committee Process, produced by the Office of Legislative Services, Office of Public Information as a guide to the public with respect to the New Jersey legislative committee process. The Office of Legislative Services is an agency of the Legislature, established by law to provide professional, nonpartisan staff support services to the Legislature and its officers, members, committees and commissions.

This brochure is printed at the expense of the New Jersey League of Municipalities."

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. For the League's purposes, the most important of these are the Housing and Local Government Committee in the Assembly and the Urban and Community Affairs Committee in the Senate. 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. Such was the case in the recently concluded Special Session for Property Tax Reform

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 proportional composition of the membership of the committee generally 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. Much of this information can also be obtained directly from any member of your League's Intergovernmental Relations team at 609-695-3481, extensions 112, 120 or 121.

A list of legislative committees, their members and professional staff aides is available on the Legislature's website (www.njleg.state.nj.us) or in hard copy. Much of this information is also included in our annual publication, "At Your Fingertips Legislative Roster."

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. The League's Intergovernmental Relations staff carefully monitors and, where necessary, regularly notifies and testifies before these committees, in order to inform the members of the potential impact of their decisions on efficient, effective and economical administration of government programs and services, at the local level.

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 website (www.njleg.state.nj.us).

The *New Jersey Legislative Calendar* lists meeting 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 website reflects the most recent information available.

For further information, call us at 609-695-3481, extensions 112, 120 or 121, or 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.

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 website (www.njleg.state.nj.us). The website provides information about the bill history, committee agendas, committee aids, 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 previously listed above) or your state legislative district office for assistance.

At this point, you will want to ascertain the League's position, if any, on your bill of interest. We, also, want to know about proposals that interest you. Accordingly, we urge you to contact a member of our Intergovernmental Relations staff at 609-695-3481, extensions 112, 120 or 121. Local action, coordinated through the League, can enhance the prospects for a favorable public policy outcome.

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. Again, your Intergovernmental Relations staff can be a valuable resource on this.

Sign up to be a witness. Witnesses must register prior to a public hearing or committee meeting to be scheduled to speak. Contact the committee aide to confirm registration procedures. The committee chair

establishes protocol for public testimony. Generally, all registered witnesses are given an opportunity to speak. However, if the issue draws particularly large attendance, the chairperson may limit the number of witnesses and duration of testimony.

Here again, let us know when you plan to witness, so that we can coordinate and complement your efforts.

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 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.

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.

1

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.

2

Bill Introduced – During a session, the prime sponsor gives the bill to the Secretary of the Senate or Clerk of the General Assembly, who reads the bill title aloud. This is known as the first reading. The bill is then printed and released to the public.

3

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

4

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.

5

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.

6

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.

7

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).

8

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.

9

Governor’s Action – After legislative passage, the bill is sent **LAW** – A bill becomes law upon the Governor’s signature or

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.

10

after 45 days if no action is taken. However, should no action be taken on a bill passed within the last 10 days of a legislative session, it fails to become law. If vetoed, a bill can become law if the Legislature overrides the veto by a 2/3 vote (27 in the Senate, 54 in the Assembly). A law takes effect on the day specified in its text or, if unspecified, July 4th following its passage.

END

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, use the League's "At Your Fingertips Legislative Roster" (Copies, at \$20.00 each, - \$10.00 for League members - can be ordered by contacting Ms. Shirley Cade at scade@njslom.com or 609-695-3481, ext. 114.) or 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:

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

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

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

LEAGUE ONLINE RESOURCES

Inside the Statehouse: Your Role in the Process http://www.njslom.org/legislative_process_cover.html

NJLM's Legislative Priorities for 2007 <http://www.njslom.org/legpriorities.html>

League Legislative Bulletins <http://www.njslom.org/bulletin.html>

Important Issue Alerts <http://www.njslom.org/dearmay.html>