

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

The legislature decides policy by passing bills. A bill must pass both houses of the legislature and be signed by the governor before it becomes law. Other proposals introduced in the legislature also support the body's policy making function. Joint resolutions, which must pass both houses, may propose constitutional amendments, develop a session schedule, or modify the rules that govern both houses. They do not require the governor's signature. Simple resolutions, which are adopted by only one house, may organize the house at the beginning of the session, propose changes to house rules, or ask the attorney general for a legal opinion on a bill.

Introducing a Bill. A bill that proposes to make a change in current law will amend, create, repeal, renumber, renumber and amend, or repeal and recreate one or more sections of the *Wisconsin Statutes*. After the Legislative Reference Bureau drafts a bill, it is ready for introduction in one of the legislative houses. Each measure must go through regular procedures and be passed by the house of origin before it can go to the other house, where the process is repeated.

No one but individual legislators or legislative committees may introduce a bill. However, the statutes direct the Joint Committee on Finance to introduce the governor's executive budget bill without change. The legislator who introduces a bill is its "author"; others in the house of origin who support the bill may sign on as "coauthors". The measure may also list "cosponsors" from the second house.

When passing laws, legislators act as the representatives of the people. Therefore, every bill introduced in the legislature begins with the words: "The people of the state of Wisconsin, represented in senate and assembly, do enact as follows:".

Fiscal Estimates and Bill Analyses. Fiscal estimates put a price tag on legislation. In 1953, Wisconsin pioneered fiscal estimates, often called "fiscal notes", and many other states have copied this important legislative tool. Every measure that increases or decreases state or general local government revenues or expenditures must be accompanied by a reliable estimate of its short-range and long-range fiscal effects. Agencies that would ultimately administer the proposed program or be affected by the measure, should it be enacted, prepare most fiscal notes. In the highly technical area of public retirement systems, the Joint Survey Committee on Retirement Systems prepares fiscal estimates with the assistance of research staff. In these cases, the note must evaluate not only the fiscal effect of a proposal but also its legality under state and federal law and its desirability as a matter of public policy.

Since 1967, the Legislative Reference Bureau has prepared an analysis of each bill introduced in the legislature, explaining in plain language the existing law and how it will change if the bill becomes law. The analysis is printed in the bill immediately following the title. As a general rule, analyses are not updated to reflect amendments approved during the legislative process, so they usually describe only the content of the bill at introduction.

Introduction, First Reading, and Referral to Committee. A bill is introduced when the chief clerk of the author's house assigns it a number and records the introduction for the house journal. Traditionally, the "first reading" took place when the clerk read that part of the proposal's title known as the "relating clause" – the clause that briefly describes the subject matter of the bill, e.g., "relating to the powers and duties of state traffic patrol officers and motor vehicle inspectors" when the house was meeting. In recent times, the clerk usually distributes a report showing the numbers and relating clauses of proposals offered for introduction which takes the place of an actual reading. After first reading, the presiding officer usually refers the proposal to the appropriate standing committee for review. Generally bills that appropriate money, provide for revenue, or relate to taxation are referred to the Joint Committee on Finance before they can be enacted into law.

Committee Hearings. All committee proceedings are open to the general public. Neither assembly nor senate rules require a chairperson to schedule a hearing. If a hearing is held, anyone may speak to the committee to support or oppose a measure or merely to present information to the committee without taking a position. Persons may also register for or against a proposal or submit written comments or petitions without making an oral presentation.

Committees do not keep verbatim transcripts of their hearings, but they do maintain appearance records listing persons who testify or register at the hearing, together with any printed information



Legislation may be discussed in partisan caucuses, in committee hearings, or informally among members, but floor debate is the one stage in the legislative process when a member can speak to all of her colleagues about a bill. Here freshman representative Leah Vukmir addresses the full Assembly for the first time. (Jay Salvo, Assembly Photographer)

those parties submit relative to bills and resolutions before the committee. Records for the current legislative session are filed in the office of the committee chairperson. Copies of appearance records for prior sessions, beginning with the 1953 session, are filed in the Legislative Reference Bureau.

The chairperson of a committee decides whether or not to take action on a particular proposal. If the decision is to act, the chairperson will call an “executive session” of the committee. In the session, committee members discuss the bill and may ask questions of persons in attendance, but no further public testimony is taken. At the close of the executive session, the committee decides whether to recommend passage of the bill as originally introduced, passage with amendments, or rejection. If the result is a tie vote, the committee can report the bill without recommendation. A committee’s decision is contained in a brief report to the house. (Bills that receive a negative recommendation are almost never reported to the floor.)

The following is an example of a committee report to the assembly from the *Assembly Journal*, January 27, 2003:

The Committee on **Budget Review** reports and recommends:

Assembly Bill 3

Relating to: limitations on the filling of vacant positions in state government.

Assembly Amendment 1 to Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 adoption:

Ayes: 7 – Representatives Kerkman, M. Lehman, Gunderson, Weber, Lassa, Steinbrink and Miller.

Noes: 1 – Representative Grothman.

Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 adoption:

Ayes: 7 – Representatives Kerkman, M. Lehman, Grothman, Gunderson, Weber, Lassa and Steinbrink.

Noes: 1 – Representative Miller.

Passage as amended:

Ayes: 7 – Representatives Kerkman, M. Lehman, Grothman, Gunderson, Weber, Lassa and Steinbrink.

Noes: 1 – Representative Miller.

To committee on **Rules**.

Samantha Kerkman

Chairperson

Committee on Budget Review

Committee chairpersons determine the scheduling of committee hearings. A committee is allowed a reasonable period of time to consider matters referred to it. A majority of the members of the assembly may withdraw a bill not reported by an assembly committee 21 days after the date of referral by motion or petition. In the senate, a majority may vote to withdraw a bill from a committee at any time but not during the 7 days preceding any scheduled committee hearing nor the 7 days following the date on which the hearing was held. In both houses, when an attempt is unsuccessful, all subsequent motions to withdraw the same proposal require at least a two-thirds vote of the members. In practice, bills are very rarely withdrawn from committees without a committee report.

Scheduling Debate. Both the senate and assembly make use of a daily calendar to schedule proposals for consideration. In the 2003 Legislature, all proposals reported by senate standing committees are referred to the Committee on Senate Organization; in the assembly, they are referred to the Committee on Rules. These committees schedule business for floor debate.

Parliamentary Procedure. The rules of parliamentary procedure, which are guides for each house, facilitate the legislative process and are printed in pamphlets, titled “Senate Rules” and “Assembly Rules”. Each house may create new rules and amend or repeal its current rules by passage of a simple resolution. “Joint Rules” deal with the relations between the houses and with administrative proceedings common to both. Changes in joint rules require the passage of a joint resolution.

Parliamentary process may seem unduly cumbersome to the onlooker, but it helps the houses operate in an organized fashion. The process is designed to protect the minority in its right to be heard and to promote careful deliberation and orderly consideration of all legislation. For particularly difficult procedural questions, the presiding officer of each house has access to such standard sources as *Mason’s Manual of Legislative Procedure*, *Jefferson’s Manual*, and *Rulings of the Chair*.

Second Reading. Once a bill is scheduled for house action, the clerk gives it a second reading by title. The purpose of a second reading is to consider amendments. An amendment may be a “simple” amendment, which makes changes within the bill, or a “substitute amendment”, which completely replaces the original bill. Members may offer, debate, and vote upon amendments at any time prior to a vote to “engross” the measure and read it a third time. Engrossment of a bill incorporates all adopted amendments and all approved technical corrections into a proposal in its house of origin. The rules of both houses require a formal delay after the proposal is engrossed, which gives legislators time to reconsider the issues raised by the bill. In many cases, however, the rules are suspended by unanimous consent or a two-thirds vote so that second and third readings can occur on the same legislative day.

Third Reading. The purpose of the third reading is to make a final decision on a proposal itself. After a third reading, the proposal is put to the house for a vote with the following questions: “This bill having been read 3 separate times, the question is, ‘Shall the bill pass?’” (for the senate) or “Shall the bill be passed?” (for the assembly). Members can debate the bill’s contents at this point, but it is not subject to amendment. When all members finish speaking they vote. A bill may pass on a voice vote, unless a roll call vote is required by the state constitution, by law or legislative rule, or by request of a prescribed number of members.

Action in the Second House. If the bill passes, it is “messaged” (sent) to the other house, where it goes through substantially the same procedure as in the first house. In the second house, however, the bill may be referred directly to the daily calendar without referral to a standing committee. When the second house concurs in the bill, whether with or without additional amendments, the measure is messaged back to the house of origin.

If the second house amends the bill before concurring, the house of origin must vote upon those amendments. If the original house rejects amendments or further amends the bill, the resulting proposal may be sent back to the second house or to a conference committee made up of members representing both houses, where attempts are made to iron out the differences between the 2 versions. The compromise version, drawn up by the conference committee, cannot be amended in either house when it is brought to a vote. When both houses have agreed on identical wording of a bill, the Legislative Reference Bureau “enrolls” it in its final form, incorporating any amendments and corrections approved by both houses, and the measure is forwarded for the governor’s signature.

On average about 1,800 bills were introduced in each of the past 10 legislatures, but only about 20% of those passed. Bills fail for many reasons: the house of origin may vote to “indefinitely postpone” or “table” a bill and then never take it up again; the second house may vote to “nonconcur” or may concur but with amendments unacceptable to the house of origin; or the proposal may “die in committee” and never be reported back to the house. An unsuccessful proposal does not carry over to the following legislature. A member must reintroduce it as a new bill.

Action of the Governor. The governor has 6 days (excluding Sundays) in which to act on the bill by: 1) signing it, in which case it becomes law; 2) vetoing it in whole or, if an appropriation bill, in part; or 3) failing to sign it within 6 days, in which case it becomes law without the governor’s signature. Partial veto of words or numbers within a bill is permitted in the case of bills which contain an appropriation. If the governor signs the law but vetoes part of it, the portion not vetoed becomes law.

Bills are not sent to the office of the governor immediately following passage but are presented when the governor calls for them. The legislative session schedule, however, provides deadlines after each floorperiod when all bills not yet called for must be sent to the governor. It also provides a specific floorperiod for final legislative review of the governor’s vetoes.

If the governor vetoes a bill, in whole or part, the vetoed parts must be returned to the house of origin with the governor’s written objections. A vetoed bill or part of a bill can become law despite the governor’s objections, but it requires a two-thirds vote in each house to override the



Senate Majority Leader Mary Panzer and Assistant Majority Leader David Zien discuss upcoming Senate business with Senate Chief Clerk Don Schneider. (Richard G.B. Hanson II, Senate Photographer)

veto. If either house fails to muster the sufficient number of votes, the governor's veto is sustained, and the vetoed bill or portion dies.

Session Laws. Each new law is numbered as a Wisconsin Act, based on the year of the legislative session and its order of enactment, e.g., 2003 Wisconsin Act 1. The date of enactment is the date the governor approves the act, the date it becomes a law without the governor's signature, or the date the legislature votes to override the governor's veto. The secretary of state assigns the new law a date of publication. On or before that date, copies of the act in pamphlet form, called a "slip law", must be available for public distribution. The secretary of state must publish the act's number, title, and original bill number within 10 working days after the date of enactment in the newspaper designated as the official state paper for publication of legal notices (currently the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*). The notice contains the date of enactment and date of publication and states the act is available for public distribution. The act takes effect the day after its assigned publication date, unless another effective date is specified in the law itself.

Ultimately, the Legislative Reference Bureau combines all the laws enacted during the biennium into bound volumes, called "Wisconsin Session Laws". The Revisor of Statutes Bureau incorporates any portions of these laws that make changes in the statutes into the edition of the "Wisconsin Statutes" dated for that legislative biennium. Thus, the edition identified as the 2003-2004 *Wisconsin Statutes* will include all statutory changes resulting from laws enacted by the 2003 Legislature.

The Budget Bill. The budget bill is the longest and most complex bill of the session. Because Wisconsin's budget covers a 2-year period from July 1 of one odd-numbered year through June 30 of the next, its development involves a chain of events stretching over almost a year. In the fall of every even-numbered year, state agencies must submit funding requests to the Department of Administration. Their funding requests include estimates of the cost of existing services over the next 2 years and may propose changes they hope are made in their programs. The Department of Administration's state budget office then compiles the data for review by the governor or governor-elect. While developing the budget, the governor may hold a hearing on any department's budget request to get additional input.

State law requires the governor to deliver the budget message to the new legislature on or before the last Tuesday in January, although the legislature may extend the deadline at the governor's request. The state budget report and the biennial executive budget bill or bills accompany the message.

In the legislature, the Joint Committee on Finance holds hearings on the departmental requests and governor's program initiatives. When these are completed, it reports the budget bill to the house of the legislature in which it was introduced. The committee's report takes the form of a substitute amendment. The bill then follows the normal legislative procedure through both houses of the legislature and is submitted for the governor's approval. The governor may sign the budget bill, veto it in its entirety (which would be unlikely), or use partial vetoes, as is usually the case. To meet the state's budgetary cycle, the new budget law should be effective by July 1 of the odd-numbered year, but there sometimes is a delay of several days, or even weeks or months, during which state agencies continue to operate at their levels of appropriation from the preceding budget.

Further Reading. The preceding section has provided a brief description of how a bill becomes a law in Wisconsin. In practice, legislative procedure is more complex than explained here. The feature article from the 1993-1994 *Wisconsin Blue Book* contains a more detailed description and uses a case study approach to further illustrate the legislative process. It may be accessed via the *Wisconsin Blue Book* link on the Legislative Reference Bureau's Web site: www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs