



# A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature

## How to Find Legislative Documents and Follow the Legislative Process

The legislative process is complex and, to the outsider, can be something of a mystery. How does the citizen follow that process? How do you know what is happening on a particular topic? How do you follow the progress of a particular bill? How do you know when a public hearing will be held? Not that many years ago, this was a difficult task. Businesses and associations hired lobbyists to handle this for them, and citizens had relatively little access to this information. However, with the advent of the Internet and development of the Legislature's home page, among other resources, this task has become much easier. Information about the activities of the Legislature is now more readily available to all.

### **GETTING STARTED**

#### ***THE LEGISLATURE'S HOME PAGE***

Although there are other sources of information, this guide focuses on the Legislature's home page because of the wealth of information it contains. It can be found at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>. The home page is shown in the following figure. It will be referred to throughout this guide, though not all features of the home page will be described in detail.

State of Wisconsin Home Page      Site Map      Contact Us      FAQs

Site Search

Home

Senate ▶

Assembly ▶

Legislation ▶

Joint Legislative Committees ▶

Legislative Service Agencies ▶

Wisconsin Law ▶

Wisconsin Blue Book

2010 Redistricting Information

Legislative Process ▶

Request text and history of legislative proposals

Assembly    Senate

Proposal Type

Bill ▼

Proposal Number

Session

2013 Regular Session ▼

Submit

Photos by Brent Nicastro and Jay Salvo

**Legislative Activity**

2013-2014 Session Calendar

Committee Schedule

Senate Session

Assembly Session

Spotlight

Session Statistics - Updated May 2, 2013

Audio/Video Coverage

**Budget Bill**

Assembly Bill 40

Earmark Transparency Report

**Mining**

Wisconsin Act 1

**DOCUMENTS**

Searchable database of bills and amendments, statutes, and other legislative documents.

**WHO REPRESENTS ME?**

Find your state and federal representatives.

**Legislative Districts**

**NOTIFICATION SERVICE**

Sign up for e-mail notifications regarding legislative activity.

**PRESS CREDENTIALS**

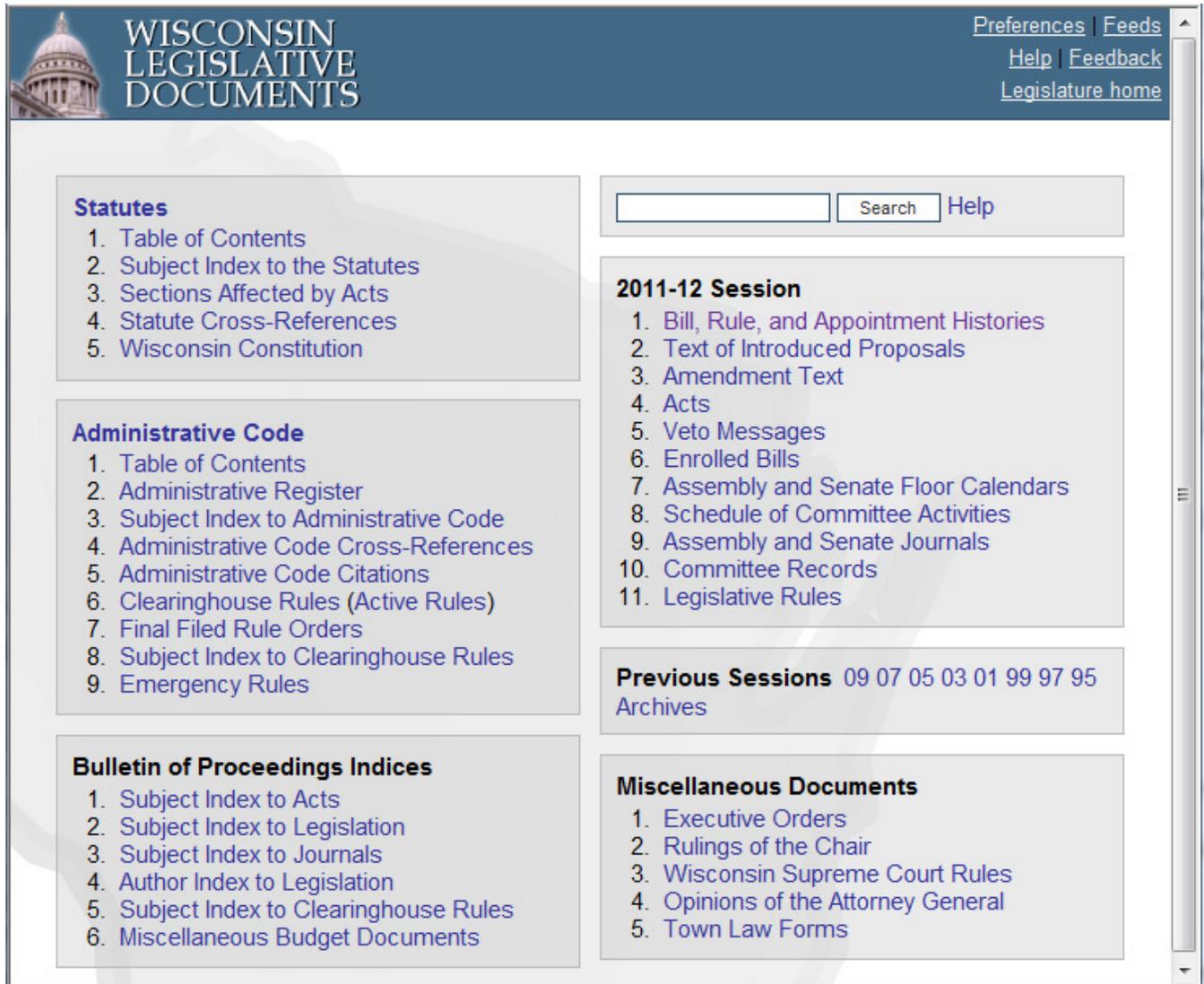
Members of the media may submit an application for media access to cover the Legislature.

In the center of the home page is a photograph of the State Capitol. (You see a different photograph of the Capitol each time you visit the home page.) To the left of the photograph is a column of tabs with fly-out menus. The second and third tabs provide links to various information about the Senate and the Assembly, including the home pages of each individual Senator and Representative and information about Senate and Assembly committees. Other tabs provide links to information about joint legislative committees, legislative service agencies, Wisconsin law and legislation, and various other types of information regarding the Legislature. At the bottom of this column is a quick search function for finding the text and history of bills and other legislative proposals.

Below the picture are three links, labeled **Documents**, **Who Represents Me?** and **Notification Service**. We will explore these in later sections. To the right of the picture are links to information about legislative sessions, committee calendars, and the like.

***THE LEGISLATIVE DOCUMENTS PAGE***

If you click on the **Documents** link below the picture on the home page, you will see the Legislative Documents page, shown in the following figure.



The first box on the right is a general search function. The first two boxes on the left side of this page deal with current law: the first box deals with the Wisconsin Statutes and Constitution; the second box deals with the Wisconsin Administrative Code (the rules promulgated by executive branch agencies to implement the statutes). The last box on the left and the second box on the right deal with legislation of the current legislative session. The third box on the right provides links to archives of all of this information--statutes, rules, and legislation--from previous sessions. The last box includes other miscellaneous documents, such as Executive Orders of the Governor and formal Opinions of the Attorney General.

## **USING THE HOME PAGE AND DOCUMENTS PAGE**

There are multiple ways to find most any type of information on the Legislature's Internet site, starting with the general search function on the Legislative Documents page.

### ***HOW DO I USE THE GENERAL SEARCH FUNCTION?***

You can use the general search function to find information regarding specific topics, specific sections of the statutes, or specific bills. It is located on the Legislative Documents page, in the first box on the right side.

If you want to find information regarding renewable energy, for example, type the words "renewable energy" in the box and click "search." You will get approximately 1,700 results. On the right side of the results page is a box that allows you to limit your search, by type of document, legislative biennium or session, and other criteria. If you are looking for bills relating to renewable energy, click "Text of Legislation" and you now have fewer than 150 results. If you are looking for statutes relating to renewable energy, click "Statutes" to see the relevant statutes; or, you can scroll to the bottom of the "Limit your search" box to find the 10 sections of the statutes and Administrative Code with the most occurrences of the words "renewable" and "energy."

Note that bills and laws contain many references to other laws. Following these references is essential to understanding what you are reading. In the documents found through this search function, most of the references are live links that will take you to the referenced provisions.

Explore this search function and you will find that it is a powerful tool to research many types of legislative documents.

### ***HOW DO I FIND THE STATUS AND TEXT OF A BILL?***

The home page contains an easy-to-use tool to find the text and status of legislation, if you know the number. It is found in the lower-left corner of the page, under the heading ***Request text and history of legislative proposals***. Simply fill in the form and either click the "Submit" button or hit "Enter" on your keyboard. Note that the database this tool uses includes information for all general and special sessions of the Legislature going back to the 1995 Biennium. A special session is identified by the year and month in which the session was called by the Governor.

This tool actually gives you far more than just the text and history of a bill. If the bill was passed and signed by the Governor, you will get a link to the final, published act, as well as a link to a brief memorandum by the Legislative Council describing it (labeled "LC Act Memo"). If the bill was amended, you will get a link to the text of the amendments and a link to the Legislative Council amendment memo. In addition, you will get links to fiscal estimates submitted by state agencies affected by the legislation, the record of committee proceedings, and information about lobbying on the bill, prepared by the Government Accountability Board.

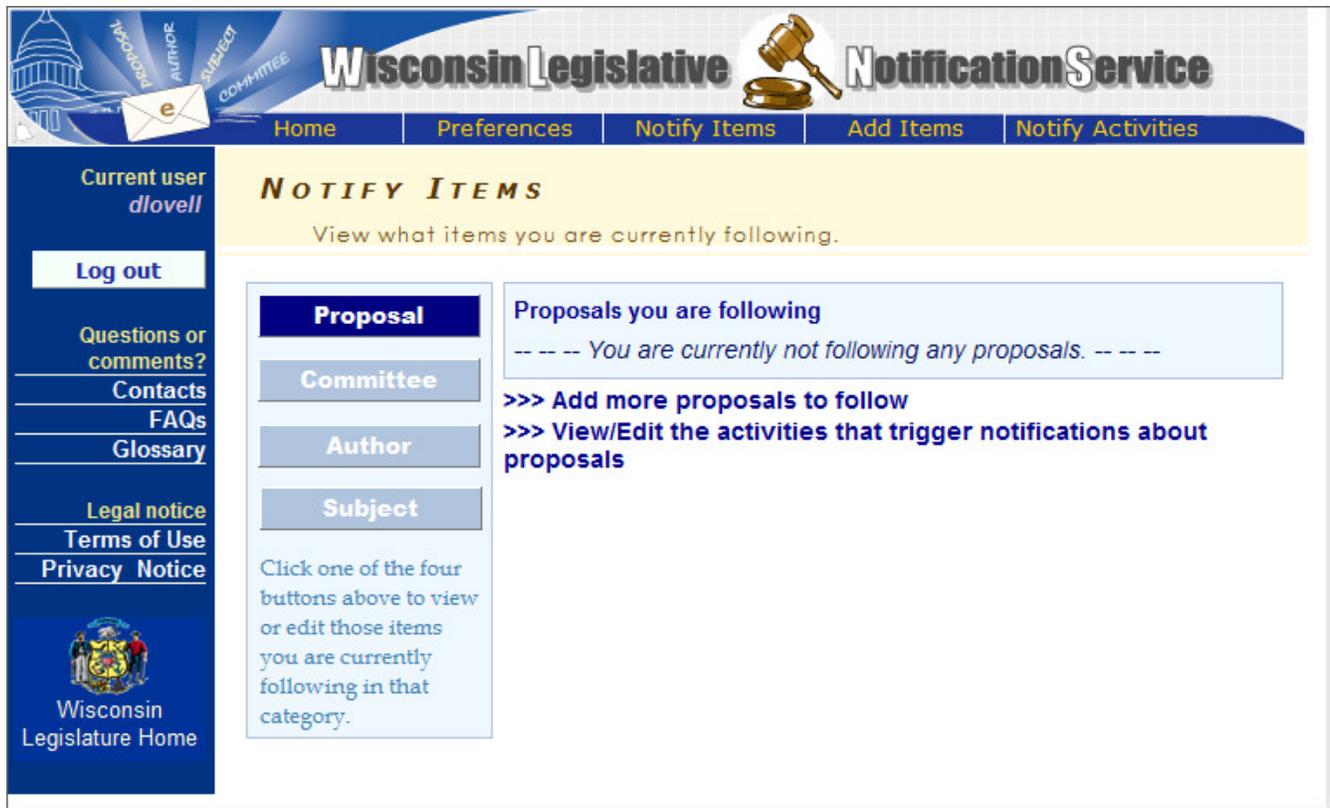
### **HOW DO I FIND A BILL IF I DON'T KNOW THE BILL NUMBER?**

Use the general search function on the Legislative Documents page, described earlier, to find the number of a bill. Use search terms that either describe the subject or that you think are likely to be found in the bill. If you are not able to find the bill number this way, your legislator's office may be able to help you. If you do not know who your legislator is, use the **Who Represents Me?** function on the home page to find out.

### **HOW DO I TRACK A BILL THROUGH THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS?**

The Wisconsin State Legislature has a legislative notification service that allows anyone to track the progress of legislation and the activities of the Legislature and legislative committees. A user specifies what he or she wants to follow and the system then sends e-mail messages every time there is a development related to that topic.

To activate this service, click on **Notification Service** below the photograph in the center of the home page. You will first need to create an account. Once you have an account, you must specify what bills you want to track. On the home page of the notification service, click on **Add Items**, and you will see this screen:



From here, you can identify individual **Proposals** (bills) you want to follow. Using the **Committee** tab you can receive notice regarding all proposals that are referred to individual committees. Using the **Author** tab, you can receive notices regarding every proposal introduced by a specified legislator. Using the **Subject** tab, you can enter key words

identifying subjects you are interested in; you will receive all e-mail notifications that include your key words.

Next, click the **Notify Activities** button, and you will see this screen:

Check the points in the legislative process that you want to receive notices of, click **Save**, and you are done. There are many more options available to users, which you will learn as you explore this site.

Your personal list of notification items can be viewed and revised using the **Notify Items** button.

### ***HOW DO I FIND OUT ABOUT A PUBLIC HEARING ON A BILL?***

The best way to find out about a public hearing on a bill is through the legislative notification service, described in the preceding section. However, hearings sometimes are scheduled with very little notice. As a backup to the notification service, you can call the office of the chair of the committee that will hold the hearing and ask for the committee clerk. The clerk may be able to tell you when the chair intends to hold a hearing.

### ***HOW DO I FIND INFORMATION ABOUT THE BUDGET BILL?***

The budget bill is a massive document, many hundred pages in length, affecting all of state government and many other subjects. The best way to find information about it is to use the Internet site of the Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB), the agency that assists the Legislature through this process. From the ***Legislative Service Agencies*** tab on the left side of the Legislature's home page, select ***Legislative Fiscal Bureau***. The ***Publications*** tab gives a drop-down menu with three choices related to the budget bill (among other choices):

- ***2011-13 Budget***. This page links to summaries of the budget and other descriptive documents. At each step of the process, from the submission of agency budget requests to introduction of the budget, through the amendment process, to the Governor's signature on the final budget, the LFB prepares a summary of the bill, comparing it to prior versions.
- ***Budget Papers***. The LFB also prepares a separate paper for each provision in the budget, describing the provision, giving background analysis, and offering alternatives for consideration by the Joint Committee on Finance. There are several hundred of these papers for each budget.
- ***Prior Budgets***. This choice provides some or all of the same information for prior budgets, going back to the 1995-97 Budget.

The text of the final enacted budget, with vetoes, is directly accessible with its own link on the home page--look at the bottom of the column of tabs on the right side.

### ***HOW DO I FIND CURRENT LAW?***

The Legislative Documents page is the best place to start your research of current Wisconsin law. While you could use the general search function, described earlier, you may prefer to use the sections of that page titled ***Statutes*** and ***Administrative Code***. Here, you have the option of either browsing within the various resources or conducting key word searches of them.

### ***HOW DO I OBSERVE THE LEGISLATURE IN SESSION?***

There are at least three ways you can watch a session of the Legislature. First, on the right side of the home page, you can click on ***Senate Session*** or ***Assembly Session***. On the right side of the screen that opens, you will have video coverage of the session. On the left side, you will find a calendar for the day's session. Along with this calendar are links to many documents related to the bills being considered--the bills themselves and any amendments, fiscal estimates, and various reports and analyses relating to the bills.

A second way to observe a legislative session is on WisconsinEye, a public affairs network that broadcasts all legislative sessions and many legislative committee meetings, and much more relating to state and local government in Wisconsin. You can watch WisconsinEye online at <http://www.wiseye.org/>. In addition, you may be able to view it on your local cable television service.

The third, and perhaps best, way to observe the Legislature is to come to the Capitol in Madison and sit in the gallery of the Senate or Assembly to watch the proceeding from close up.

### ***WHAT ELSE CAN I LEARN FROM THE LEGISLATURE'S HOME PAGE?***

On the right side of the home page is a series of resources related to ***Legislative Activity***. The links in this list provide the following:

- A summary of the two-year legislative calendar.
- A calendar of scheduled committee meetings.
- A digest of current legislative activities, called the Spotlight.
- Statistics relating to the activities of the current legislative session.

### **OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

#### ***LEGISLATIVE SERVICE AGENCIES***

Five nonpartisan professional agencies support the Legislature, four of which produce a wide range of reports and documents. Their respective home pages can be reached through the ***Legislative Service Agencies*** tab on the Legislature's home page.

- The ***Legislative Council*** prepares brief descriptions of all amendments adopted and all bills enacted into law, identified as amendment memos and act memos. It also prepares a Legislator's Briefing Book each session, which provides an overview of a wide range of subjects that come before the Legislature. It also produces informational memoranda on topics of current interest.
- The ***Legislative Audit Bureau*** (LAB) conducts audits of state agencies and state programs, and publishes its findings and recommendations in audit reports.
- The LFB, as already noted, prepares extensive materials regarding the state budget. In addition, it produces a series of informational papers, which provide in-depth descriptions of state programs, with a particular emphasis on the fiscal aspect of the programs.
- The ***Legislative Reference Bureau*** (LRB) produces the Wisconsin Blue Book each biennium. This is a very detailed compendium of information about state and local government in Wisconsin, as well as other topics. In addition, the LRB produces several series of publications on a variety of topics. The LRB also maintains a reference library relating to the Legislature at One East Main Street, in Madison.