

HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW IN PENNSYLVANIA

FIRST STEPS: INTRODUCING A “BILL”

In its earliest stages, a law is simply an idea that is brought to the State Legislature by a member of the Senate or House, or by the Governor. If you have an idea that you'd like to see become a law, you should contact either your state Senator or House member and discuss it with him or her.

The member next takes his or her idea in writing to the Legislative Reference Bureau. The Bureau then drafts what's known as a “bill,” that takes the idea and puts it into proper form. A bill may be sponsored by one or more members of the Senate or House. The more members who sponsor the bill, the more likely it is that the bill will become a law, especially if support comes from both political parties.

If you support a particular bill, you may want to urge other members of the Legislature to co-sponsor it, to show that it has more support. Remember, this is a political process and it will be important for you to stay in touch with your legislators and others to “lobby” them to support the bill as the process unfolds.

A bill may be started in either the Senate or House. Let's say a bill is introduced in the Senate first. The bill is given a title, a bill number, and a printer's number. When a bill is amended (see below), the bill number remains the same, but the printer's number changes. Therefore, always check the printer's number to be sure that you have the most current version of the bill.

THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

Now that the bill has a name and number, the President of the Senate refers the bill to the appropriate committee. The committee studies the bill and decides whether it should go to the full Senate for consideration. The committee may hold public hearings on the bill or otherwise allow the public to express its thoughts on whether the bill should become law. If you're interested in a bill that is in a committee, you may wish to meet with the Chair of that committee to discuss your views and/or to ask for public hearings on the bill.

The committee has the option of proposing amendments to the bill or of keeping it in its original form. The committee also has the option of deciding not to “report” or send the bill to the Senate floor. In that case, the bill is said to “die in committee” and will not be considered further.

CONSIDERATION BY THE SENATE

The Constitution of Pennsylvania requires that a bill be considered on three separate days in both the Senate and the House. A bill receives its “first consideration” on the day it is introduced and referred to committee. During first consideration, no debate or amendments to the bill are permitted from the floor of the Senate.

When a committee has favorably reported a bill to the full Senate, it next comes up for “second consideration” by the entire Senate. This is the first opportunity for Senators who are not members of the committee to which the bill was assigned to offer an amendment to the bill.

On “third consideration,” Senators can amend a bill only by unanimous consent of the Senate. However, debate takes place and the various Senators can express their support or opposition to the bill. At the conclusion of debate, each Senator votes on the bill as the roll is called. In the Senate, a simple majority -- or 26 -- of Senators must vote yes on the bill for it to pass. (Certain funding bills require a two-thirds majority vote to pass the Senate and House.)

CONSIDERATION BY THE HOUSE

After a bill has passed the Senate, it is taken to the House. The Speaker of the House then refers the bill to an appropriate committee for consideration. The procedure from here follows the Senate’s procedure; that is, a committee may vote to amend the bill, to send the bill to the floor of the House, or let it die in committee.

As in the Senate, the bill must go through two “considerations” after it is reported to the floor of the House. Once on the floor of the House, a simple majority -- or 102 votes -- is needed to pass the bill. House members, like their colleagues in the Senate, have an opportunity to amend the bill and debate it before a final vote is taken.

If the bill passes the House, but with amendments that were not part of the bill when it was in the Senate, the bill must go back to the Senate for a vote. If the Senate does not agree with the amendments made in the House, the bill is referred to a conference committee. That committee consists of three members from each chamber, appointed by the presiding officers. The committee is responsible for resolving, if possible, the differences between the Senate and House versions and then reporting the bill back to the Senate and House for further consideration. Each house then votes on the committee’s report. A majority vote is required to pass the report and the bill.

ON TO THE GOVERNOR

Once a bill has been passed by the Senate and the House, it is sent on to the Governor for his consideration. If the Governor approves the bill, he signs it and it becomes law. If he does

not agree with the bill, he may veto it. A bill that has been vetoed is returned to the Senate (or the House, if it originated there) for further consideration. The State Legislature can override the Governor's veto by a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber.

If the Governor takes no action on a bill within ten (10) calendar days while the Legislature is in session, the bill automatically becomes law. If the Legislature is not in session, the Governor has thirty (30) days to act before the bill will automatically become law.

Once signed by the Governor, the official certified copy of the bill is given to the Secretary of the Commonwealth, assigned an act number and filed in the State Department. Next, the Legislative Reference Bureau, the agency that originally wrote the bill, prepares the Act for official printing. The Act is now the law of the Commonwealth.

As you can see, there are many steps before an idea is turned into a law. At each step, citizens have the right to speak their minds on the bill, letting the legislators and the Governor know what they want.

We urge you to take advantage of these opportunities and become part of the process of turning ideas into laws. Remember, each citizen has an equal voice in the process. To find out the status of a bill, you can call the Legislative Reference Bureau at (717) 787-2342 or the Pennsylvania School Reform Network (PSRN). Or, you can visit the PSRN website at 333.psrn.org. Click on the "Current Legislation" page for help in researching bills on line.

For more information on how a bill becomes law, or how you can become part of the process, contact the Pennsylvania School Reform Network at (717) 238-7171; e-mail: psrn@elc-pa.org.

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