

THE CITIZEN'S ROSTRUM

The key events in any bill's legislative life are the hearings before committees. Citizens may communicate personally with legislators at any time about any bill, but the committee hearing is the occasion when an individual may publicly state approval or opposition or suggest changes to a bill.

You may testify on any bill that concerns you. All committee hearings are open and are scheduled well in advance, usually at least 3 days ahead and often longer.

The hearing allows you to speak your mind before the committee takes any action and before the bill is brought to the attention of each house for debate and final vote.

ACCESS TO THE COMMITTEE ROOM

You may enter a legislative hearing room at any time, even if the door is closed or a hearing is proceeding. The common standards of courtesy and respect apply; enter quietly if a meeting is in progress.

BILLS ARE AVAILABLE

To ensure that you are effective and prepared when testifying, it is a good idea to read over the bill in question before your appearance.

Copies of bills are available, at a small charge, at the Bill Distribution Room (Room 74) in the basement of the Capitol. Because amendments may change the language of a bill at any of the stages of its life, **be sure that you are referring to the latest version.** Bills are also available electronically at no charge for viewing or download from the Internet at <http://leg.mt.gov>. (Please note that the printed version of a bill is the official version; the electronic version may not be in its final form when posted.)

PRESS COVERAGE

Because all committee meetings are open, members of the media may be present. Your statements may be quoted, or you may appear on television. Additionally, many meetings are broadcast by TVMT, which is a state government broadcasting service. TVMT may distribute the televised proceedings to various Montana local access and public television stations and for viewing via the Internet.

All legislative committee meetings that take place at the Capitol are broadcast live over the Internet, through either streaming audio or video. On-demand archives that contain audio or video recordings are available shortly after the meeting on the legislative website.

DON'T GET STAGE FRIGHT

Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by the hearing process, the objective of which is to gather all pertinent information so that the committee can make an informed recommendation. Your statement will be heard by a committee of legislators elected to represent citizens like you. Therefore, don't miss your chance to talk.



PAID LOBBYISTS MUST REGISTER

If you are being paid to support or oppose legislation, you must be licensed as a lobbyist by the Commissioner of Political Practices, which requires payment of a \$150 fee.

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Having Your Say Before a Montana Legislative Committee



It's Your Right.

The Constitutions of the United States and of the State of Montana ensure **every citizen the right to speak** on every public issue and to be heard by officials at every level of government. The Montana Legislature extends that right to any bill (which includes any resolution).

Montana's Legislature functions in a **completely open atmosphere.** After full consideration and with comments and advice from the public, every vote by committee and by either house must be a public vote.

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KNOW THE COMMITTEE

You may find it helpful before coming to the meeting to know to whom you will be speaking.

Members of all committees are appointed before the opening of the legislative session. Rosters are announced in the press, listed in various directories, and available on the Internet at <http://leg.mt.gov>.

The Speaker of the House or the Committee on Committees of the Senate designates the committee presiding officer who conducts the hearing and applies the rules of the Legislature. The vice presiding officer, who presides in the absence of the presiding officer, is also designated. Both the presiding officer and vice presiding officer are members of the party holding a majority of seats in the house that the committee represents.

A staff person from one of the legislative agencies is permanently assigned to each committee to provide professional assistance. Each committee also has a secretary assigned for the session to keep the record and to perform clerical functions.

HOW TO FIND THE COMMITTEE

Each committee of the House and Senate is assigned to a meeting room in the Capitol. Occasionally, a hearing that is expected to attract a large crowd may be moved to a larger venue; such changes are noted on hearing schedules and notices are placed outside the regular meeting rooms.

The time and place of every committee hearing is posted several days in advance on the boards reserved for that purpose in the legislative lobbies. In addition, computer terminals are placed in the legislative lobbies for the convenience of the public in obtaining accurate, up-to-the-minute information on the status of each introduced bill. You can also call or visit the Legislative Information Office, located in the 1st floor lobby in the Capitol, telephone (406)444-4800, or check hearing information on the Internet at <http://leg.mt.gov>.

The state's major newspapers also print the schedule of committee hearings each day of the session.

HOW A HEARING WORKS

Hearings are as informal and unpretentious as decorum allows.

Please note that a committee often hears multiple bills at each meeting. The order in which bills are heard is at the chair's discretion and is announced at the start of each hearing.

Because the committee tries to hear several bills at each meeting, the presiding officer will allot time for proponents and opponents of each measure and will reserve a period for questions from the committee members following testimony.

Seating in committee rooms is limited, so plan to arrive a few minutes before starting time to ensure yourself a chair and to reduce diversions after the meeting opens. Sign the witness sheet for the committee record, and indicate the number of the bill that you are interested in and whether you support or oppose it.

Inquire to find out if other persons also plan to present testimony similar to yours. If so, the committee will appreciate your effort to coordinate testimony to eliminate time-consuming redundancy.

At a hearing with many prospective witnesses, lack of time may prevent all individuals from testifying. In that case, you may be asked to state only your name and whether you are a proponent or an opponent (in such an instance, please be aware that you may always submit written testimony to the committee, even if you are not given the opportunity to speak due to time constraints). At a large hearing, proponents or opponents may designate one or several representatives who share their viewpoints.

The hearing opens with the bill's sponsor explaining its purpose and the background of the legislation. Statements will then be requested from proponents, followed by opponents.

When your turn to testify comes, address the presiding officer and committee members and identify yourself with your name, hometown, occupation, affiliation, or other information that will indicate your acquaintance with the subject. Be specific, confine your remarks to the subject at issue, and indicate clearly your reasons for supporting or opposing the bill.

In order for your testimony to be part of the official record, you are strongly encouraged to provide a written copy of your testimony to committee members and the committee secretary. If you have access to copying facilities, it will be helpful if you provide sufficient copies for each committee member plus two for the staff. (Please note that public copying machines are not available at the Capitol, so copies should be made ahead of time.) However, do not let the fact that you have not prepared a written statement prevent you from testifying.

QUESTIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE

After both proponents and opponents have spoken, the presiding officer will allow committee members to ask questions. If you are called upon, respond directly, but remember that only committee members are allowed to ask questions and that you may speak only when called upon.

When committee members have concluded their questions, the sponsor will make a closing statement to end the hearing on that particular bill.

EXECUTIVE ACTION

The committee may hear a second or even a third bill in a single meeting.

If the hearings do not consume all of the meeting time allotted, the committee may go into executive session to review the information that it has gathered and to discuss its recommendations.

The executive session is also open to the public, and you are welcome to observe and listen, but the audience is not permitted to join in the discussion.

During the executive session, the members may express their views on the bill, propose and adopt or reject amendments, and finally take a recorded vote for a recommendation of "do pass" or "do not pass" or other action on the bill.

It may be necessary to continue executive action to a later meeting to allow more time for consideration.

