

LEGISLATIVE LINGO

If you spend any time at the State House or even in conversations you have with your representatives, you may hear these terms used.

Legislature – the lawmaking branch of State government. Also referred to as “the General Assembly” and includes Senators and Representatives of the House.

Legislator – an elected member of a legislative body. In VT, there are 30 members of the Senate and 130 House Representatives. All legislators serve two year terms.

On the Wall – means a bill has been referred to a committee, but they haven’t done anything about it yet. You can literally walk into any committee room and look at the wall to see what bills have been referred to a committee and whether there has been any action on a particular bill.

Taking the Bill off the Wall – means the committee is going to start discussing a bill.

Testimony – If you want to testify in committee because you are affected by pending legislation, reach out about that to the committee assistant, not the chair or another committee member. Long time committee assistant Linda Leehman (802) 828-2258, (leehman@leg.state.vt.us) is with the Senate Ag Cmte and there’s a new point person to assist the respective House Ag Cmte: Sydonia Axis Lary (slary@leg.state.vt.us).

Biennium – the legislative session in VT is two years long or called a biennium. This means that bills introduced in year one can still pass in year two. Bills that have been introduced in the second year of the session need to pass the same year or they “die.”

Dead bills – did not pass in a session. They can be reintroduced in a new session. Also, sometimes policy makers call a bill dead when it doesn’t have a chance to pass.

Crossover – describes a time in the legislative calendar by which bills are expected to pass from one chamber over to the other chamber through floor votes. It’s not a strict deadline but usually associated with town meeting week since the legislature goes into recess for that week. Afterwards, the resuming time left is realistically little to advance bills in the chamber of origin while also leaving enough time and reason to plow through the other chambers’ process.

Mark up – means a committee is editing a bill. With the support of their legislative council the committee discusses the bill one line at a time, and accept or reject final edits. The legislative council then re-drafts the “marked-up” bill for a vote on that version of the bill by the committee.

This is the most important time to be present if you care about a bill, and it is often difficult to predict just when it will happen.

Straw Vote – is a vote that doesn't count for anything, but gives the chair a chance to see whether people are agreeing on the bill language or not. Most times, if a legislator votes one way on a straw vote, it is very difficult for them to change their position on the final vote.

Call the Question – A legislator will call the question when they think there has been enough discussion and they want a vote. Another legislator needs to second the question for the chair to then take the vote.

Roll Call – In committee, votes on moving bills are usually done by roll call, recording the vote of each legislator individually. On the House and Senate floor, any legislator can ask that a vote be taken by a call of the roll. If this is not requested, then the vote will be by voice. For a roll call vote, the clerk in either body (Senate or House) will call each legislator's name. The legislator must be present in their seat in order to vote. In the House, the first person present on the roll votes and then there is a five minute break to give people a chance to talk about the vote or to get to their seats. In the Senate, the roll is just called and people vote unless a recess is requested. After the vote, the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate will announce the results of the vote. After the roll is closed, a legislator may not vote but they may ask for the floor and say how they would have voted if they'd been present, for the record.

Voice Vote - the most common way that bills are voted on. The Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate will say "All those in favor, say aye" and those who approve the bill in question will say aye or yes. And then the Speaker or President will say "All those opposed, say nay" and those opposed will say nay or no. Then the Speaker or President says what they think happened, e.g. "The ayes appear to have it." If nobody objects, then they will say "The ayes have it. You have passed (bill #)." If the Speaker or President thinks the nays have won, then they'll say the bill did not pass.

The Well of the House – this is where the House of Representatives sits when they are voting as a full body. Individual committees meet in smaller rooms throughout the State House.

Point of Order – at any time, a legislator can ask a question about the process that is happening by standing up and requesting of the Speaker or the President a "point of order." A point of order is simply a clarification of the rules and whether the process that is happening fits within the rules.

Reports and Rules – when the legislature charges an agency to write a report about something, there's usually a deadline for that. It can be expected to find relevant reports released on their due date on the legislative website.

Legislative Council – these are the staff attorneys of the Legislature. They draft bills and do research for the legislators. Usually, specific people are assigned to committees but they do move around when necessary, especially at the end of the session. The legislative council workers are the collective staff of all the legislators and committees.

Sergeant at Arms – this individual is in charge of keeping order in the State House. They are in charge of security guards and pages. If you have a question about what kinds of actions are allowed in the State House, this is the person to ask. This is also the office you call if you want to reserve a room in the State House or leave a message for a legislator.

Pages – 8th grade students who have been selected to work at the State House for 6 weeks during the legislative session. They wear green jackets and deliver messages among legislators. You can write a paper message to a legislator and drop it in the “Messages” box on the counter in the Sergeant-At-Arms office at the State House. The pages will deliver your message quickly. You must include your name and phone number (or email address).

Clerks - In the House and Senate, the clerks are the individuals who know all the rules. You will often see the Speaker or the President of the Senate confer with the clerks to check on whether they can or should do something. If you have a process question, ask the clerks.

The Card Room – this is the little area right by the ramp that leads to the cafeteria. You can reserve it to present a display and talk to people about your issue. (You must be prepared to reserve the Card Room in person, at the State House, on the first day of the legislative session a year ahead of time!)