

# YOUR STATE HOUSE

## A Guide to the Legislative Process

*By Madeleine M. Kunin, Governor of Vermont (1985)*



### Welcome to Your State House

This building belongs to you — the citizens of the State of Vermont.

The State House is both a fine museum which tells us about Vermont's history, and a lively stage where history continues to be made. The debates you listen to today may be tomorrow's headlines.

The men and women who work in the State House — the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, legislators, pages, staff, and lobbyists — are all involved in one process, enacting laws for the people of the State of Vermont.

These laws cover many subjects — to name a few: how much hunting and fishing licenses should cost, which highways should be built or repaired, how toxic wastes should be disposed of safely.

The legislators who work here also exercise “the power of the purse,” which means after the Governor recommends the budget amount they decide how much money will be spent by the state on such things as roads, schools and parks.

Every Vermonter can influence the decisions which are made here — both as a voter and as a concerned citizen — by expressing his or her point of view.

When you turn 18, you can become part of this process by registering to vote, learning about the issues and letting your Representatives and Senators know what you think.

A visit to the State House is an introduction to state government. Seek out your own Representatives and Senators, look around, ask questions and imagine that someday you might be elected to sit in these seats and represent the people.

### How Laws are Made

In a democracy, laws are made by and for the people through their elected representatives. The power to suspend or execute laws belongs to the General Assembly.

The legislative process is spelled out by the rules which the House and Senate adopt. There are separate Senate Rules, House Rules, and Joint Rules for a Joint Assembly.

These rules govern the organization of the House and Senate, the operation of legislative committees, procedures for the introduction of bills, floor debate, amendments, motions, and voting.

Although the rules sound complicated, you do not have to be a lawyer or a politician to understand the legislative process. It takes time and study, but most of the people working here are ordinary citizens who had to learn too.

No two bills go through precisely the same steps. Some fly through without delay or debate while others arouse more controversy and go through the following general procedure.

The life of a bill begins when a legislator has an idea for a new law or change in present law. The “idea” is then written in “bill form” either by the legislator, or by the legislative draftsmen who work in the Legislative Council.

After the bill is written the legislator signs it as the “sponsor.” Some bills have one sponsor and others have many sponsors. In an average two-year session there are about 1,000 bills introduced and about 30 percent of those are passed.

Each Senator and Representative receives a copy of the new bill on his or her desk. The bill is then “read” by title by the presiding officer (the Speaker in the House and the Lieutenant Governor in the Senate) and referred to an appropriate committee of legislators who study it. Most of the work on bills is done in committee.

A committee may hold a public hearing on a bill or call in individual experts to testify. For example, on a bill that mandates harsher penalties for drunk driving, the Commissioner of Public Safety, judges, lawyers, and concerned citizens would be asked to testify. On each bill, the committee asks questions to find out if the bill is clearly written, whether or not the bill is needed to help Vermonters, and who will be affected by it.



View of the House of Representatives

After hearing testimony on a bill and discussing it, the committee may vote to recommend passage or rejection of a bill, or may completely rewrite the bill by amending it. If a bill seems to have many problems

there often is no committee action and the bill’s progress is delayed or it may remain in that committee for the rest of the session.

Sometimes bills are sent to more than one committee. For example, all bills that request money for a program have to be reviewed by the Appropriations Committee.

## Becoming a Citizen Lobbyist

Even before you are old enough to vote, you can have some influence on the legislative process in Montpelier.

If you want to tell your Representative and Senator that you agree or disagree with a particular bill, write him or her a letter. You can also ask if there will be a public hearing which will give you a chance to state your views directly or listen to the views of others.

To be informed about the issues which are being discussed in the legislature you can read newspapers, and keep up with the news on television and radio.

## Voting

When you are 18, you can have a direct influence on the legislative process by exercising your right to vote. The first step in becoming a voter is to get your name placed on the check list of your town by registering to vote.

To qualify to register you must:

1. Be a U.S. citizen.
2. Register to vote at the town clerk’s office or with a notary, 17 days before the election. Watch newspapers for that deadline.
3. Be 18 years old.

You do not have to declare membership in any political party when you register to vote.

