

How a Bill Becomes a Law in Pennsylvania

Making a law in Pennsylvania is a meticulous process that takes time and effort, and can take years for an idea to become law. Every two years Pennsylvania begins a new legislative session, meaning any legislation that has not become law within that two year timeframe has to begin the process over from the beginning.

There are thousands of bills introduced every legislative session on many different subjects. It is virtually impossible for legislators to be an expert on every bill, so the General Assembly has organized various standing committees to scrutinize topic specific legislation. After a bill has been introduced, it is assigned to a particular committee. While in committee, staff analyzes the bill, writes bill summaries and answers members' questions. Sometimes members want to amend, or change, the bill, which can be done at the committee level. Staff, with the help of the legislative reference bureau, prepares amendments for the members to introduce when the bill is being considered in committee or on the House/Senate floor.

The standing committee majority chairman has the discretion to consider, or not consider, legislation assigned to them. He/She is influenced by constituents, other members who want to see the bill moved through the legislative process, or by caucus leadership. The committee chairman may call for a hearing to openly discuss the bill, inviting witnesses to explain the legislation and their reasons for support or opposition.

During a committee meeting, legislators have the opportunity to ask questions about the legislation and offer amendments. Many times the prime sponsor of the bill attends the committee meeting to offer additional information such as why the bill was introduced, additional details on the legislation, who is supporting the bill, and who would be affected by the legislation. After a discussion, members of the committee vote on any proposed amendments, and then decide by majority vote whether or not to move the bill out of committee and further through the legislative process. They also have the option to table, or set aside, the bill for a period of time or permanently.

If the legislation is voted out of committee and involves an expenditure of funds, the bill will be reassigned to the Appropriations Committee where a fiscal note, or the price tag, will be written explaining how much it will cost to enact the bill. The committee process is the same as before and is another opportunity for votes to be influenced by constituents and advocates of the legislation. After the Appropriations Committee has considered and passed the bill, it moves on to the full chamber.

Before any vote takes place on the Chamber floor, majority and minority party members meet privately in separate caucus rooms. There, they review the content of the legislation and decide whether to support or oppose all bills scheduled for a floor discussion in the near future. Each bill is considered on the floor three times. The first day of consideration is simply an announcement that the bill has been reported from a committee. There is not a debate, no amendments are offered, and no vote is taken. The bill is typically tabled after this reading for up to 15 legislative days, or calendar days when the legislature is in session. If the bill is taken off the table, it has a second reading, when it is screened again to determine whether or not enough information is available to debate the bill's merits. This reading is when the legislation would be re-assigned to the Appropriations Committee for a fiscal review. The third consideration of the bill is when a full debate, including the opportunity to suggest amendments and vote on passage (up or down), by all members. Debate over a controversial bill can go for hours and can be followed by a vote. In some instances a member can call for a vote to table the bill, meaning the chamber would not vote on the bill at all. Each bill requires a constitutional majority to pass, or 102 votes in the House and 26 in the Senate.

After the legislation passes one chamber it is sent to the second chamber for consideration. The second chamber has the same process for bill consideration, with the same checkpoints, committee structure,

and floor consideration. After final passage several things may happen. If the bill has not been amended in the second chamber it is sent directly to the Governor for his signature. Most likely, however, the bill will have been amended in the second chamber, meaning the new version will have to be approved by the original chamber. There, members decide if they agree or disagree with the proposed changes. If they do not agree, the bill goes to a conference committee to work out a compromise. The conference committee consists of members from both chambers who work out the differences of the bill and send it back to both chambers for a yes or no vote. A conference committee report may not be amended or changed by either chamber. If the majority of members in both chambers vote yes, the bill is sent to the Governor to be evaluated. The Governor can sign the bill into law, permit the bill to become law without signing it, or veto the bill. If vetoed, the General Assembly can override it with a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber.