

Citizen Lobbying

The fate of a bill is often determined by vote of the committee to which it is assigned. Call the committee clerk or the general Information Office at 287-1692 to find out when hearings are scheduled on the bill that concerns you. Ask the committee clerk to record your address and phone number and to notify you of future hearings. Also check for notices published in weekend papers.

Call or write members of the committee. Express yourself succinctly. When the public hearing is scheduled, show up with friends, testify briefly and bring with you 20 copies of short comments to include in the record for absent members. In oral testimony, try to speak extemporaneously. Avoid merely reading your hand out.

After public hearing, the bill is set for work sessions by the same committee. At least one member of your group should show up at each session to follow deliberations and voting. You have a right to attend but may not speak unless called on. Committee members may ask questions of people who can contribute information on difficult issues. During breaks you may lobby individual legislators.

After one or more work sessions, the committee will vote on the bill. Most bills are effectively killed by unanimous vote of the committee. Of those that survive, nearly all are amended. A unanimous vote either way is likely to generate a similar result on the floor. A divided committee report means you face the complex task of lobbying the full legislature (151 house members and 35 senators).

If you have done your work well, the legislators who voted for your position in committee and others you have contacted will support the issue when it comes to the Senate and House. They may be willing to explain the bill in caucus or on the floor, particularly if you outline points for them. They may also agree to distribute a sheet summarizing your position (use bullets, graphs and pastel paper).

If a bill passes each chamber but requires public funding (if it carries a "fiscal note"), it must be funded by the budget and held for approval by the Appropriations Committee at the end of the legislative session. Even bills that have passed unanimously may die on the Appropriations Table for lack of money.

No bill becomes law until signed by the Governor. It is always easier to kill a bill than to keep it alive through passage. On the other hand, no issue is dead until the Legislature adjourns. The key is to keep showing up so long as there is anything left to do, regardless of whether you seek to pass a bill or to see it defeated or amended.

Friends who feel as you do should join you for the public hearing. But don't let it drop there. One or two of you should attend work sessions, floor debates, the running of the Appropriations Table, and the Governor's office if a veto is possible. Make yourself a pest.

Anyone who is paid to lobby may have to register with the Governmental Ethics Commission (287-4179). (See Chapter 15 of Title 3.)