

Capitol Steps

From Idea to Law

A young person's guide to the legislative process



Welcome to your Legislature

Everyone in Minnesota, no matter their age, is affected by the laws passed by our Legislature. This booklet is about the legislative process; in other words, how laws are made.

Like the rest of the United States, Minnesota is governed according to the legislative process resulting in rules or laws that guide the actions of the people.

The Legislature, made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate, is one of the three branches of government. It is the branch charged with making new laws and changing old ones. Members of the Legislature are elected by the people in each legislative district. The lawmaking process takes place at the State Capitol where the representatives and senators work with the governor to turn ideas into law.

Much of the work takes place during a legislative session. In Minnesota, the session spans two years, which is called a biennium. For example, the years 2009 and 2010 are considered one biennium and referred to as the Minnesota 86th Legislative Session.

Quick Facts:

- Two houses make up the Legislature:
- House has 134 members
- Senate has 67 members
- House term - two years
- Senate term - four years*
- Number of legislative districts in the state - 67
- Each district has one senator and two representatives.
- Representatives and senators must be qualified voters of the state, be 21 years of age, and must have resided for at least one year in the state.

The state constitution limits the legislative session to 120 legislative days. A legislative day is defined as any day when either the House or Senate meets for a floor session

Typically, almost all of these legislative days are used over the course of the biennium.

During the biennium, legislators combine to introduce between 6,000 and 8,000 bills.

* Following redistricting senators serve a two-year term, then four-year terms.

How an idea becomes legislation

Ideas for new laws can come from anyone: police officers, farmers, a legislator, sales clerks, parents and even kids.

For an idea to become a law, it must first become legislation — this is language that states an idea as if it were already a law. For that to happen, the idea needs to have a House and Senate member willing to be its sponsor and move it through the process.

When a legislator introduces a bill, the idea is taking its first step toward becoming a new law.

Quick Fact:

A bill of similar language needs to be sponsored in the Senate and in the House. These are called companion bills. While they are often very much the same when they start through the legislative process, they usually don't stay the same because of amendments.

It's the Law

True or false

1. It is legal in Minnesota to text message while driving a vehicle.
2. Want a piercing other than on your earlobe, and you are under the age of 18? Not only do you need written parental consent, but the piercing service provider must witness the signature.
3. All American flags sold in Minnesota must be made in the USA.
4. The state has become a national example in its efforts to reduce the use of fossil fuels. The goal is that by 2025, 25 percent of the total energy used in the state should come from renewable power sources.
5. If a seatbelt is available on your ATV and you are 18 years or younger, you must wear it.

For answers, see page 15

Question?

*What's the difference between the Legislature and Congress?
The Minnesota Legislature makes laws that only apply to the state.
The United States Congress (also made up of a House and Senate),
creates laws for all 50 states.*

How a Bill Becomes Law

1. Bill

The idea for a new law is drafted as a bill and introduced by sponsors in both the House and the Senate.



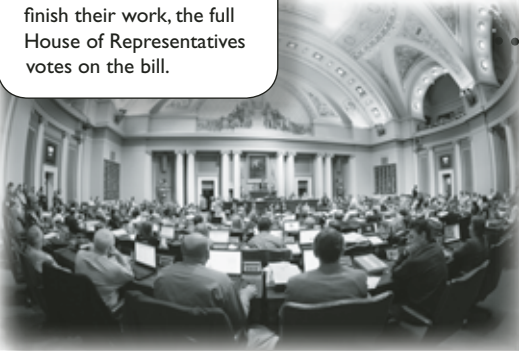
2. House Committees

The House holds committee hearings on the bill to discuss it and make changes, if necessary.



3. House Floor

After the committees finish their work, the full House of Representatives votes on the bill.



4. Senate Committees

The Senate also holds committee hearings on its version of the bill. These can go on before, during or after the House hearings.



How a Bill Becomes Law

5. Senate Floor

Just as the House does, the full Senate must vote on the bill.



6. Passage

If the House and Senate pass the same version of a bill, it is sent to the governor for action. If the language of the bills differ, then the differences have to be worked out by a conference committee.



7. Conference Committee

If the House and Senate can't reach an agreement on the language, they can work out the differences using a conference committee.



8. Governor

If the House and Senate pass the conference committee report, then it goes to the governor where it can be signed into law or vetoed.



One teen's story - Idea to law

Joe Gibson is proof that just because you're not old enough to vote doesn't mean you can't change state law. It just takes following your beliefs and not giving up — no matter how many times you hear the word “no.”

The Blooming Prairie teenager was the driving force behind a law that allows 16-year-olds to donate blood with parental consent.

Throughout the process, Gibson didn't relent even though it took nearly two years for his idea to become law.

“I'd like to, hopefully, set a precedent for other youth in Minnesota and everywhere else that you can make a difference,” he said on March 18, 2008, as he watched Gov. Tim Pawlenty sign the law lowering the minimum age requirement for blood donation.

“It's a great way to give back to the community. I'm just trying to do the right thing with this. I believe it'll really help,” Gibson said. “There's such a blood shortage in the United States and Minnesota.”

It was Joe's bloodlines that drove him throughout the process. He told the House Health and Human Services Committee in a calm, confident manner about his grandfather's 18-month battle with leukemia before passing away and how important blood donations were to his quality of life.

“During the time he was fighting, he received several blood transfusions, as well as several surgeries that required blood transfusions,” Gibson said.

“I was very close to my grandfather, and I did notice that after transfusions he would have such a better state of living. It helped him so much with his mobility and everything. It was a small miracle for him.”

One day later, Gibson was leaving his high school locker room after football practice, and wanted to participate in a blood drive being held at his school.

“I thought, ‘Hey, this is a great idea. I should do it. My grandfather needed it and I should donate blood,’” he said. “I was 15, about 160 pounds and running 5 miles a day with football, cross-country and all that stuff.”

Joe's Story



Photo by Andrew VonBank

Joe Gibson testifies before the House Health and Human Services Committee about his idea to let 16-year-olds donate blood as Rep. Patti Fritz, the bill's House sponsor, looks on.

However, state law at that time required a person be at least age 17 to donate.

“It didn’t make any sense to me,” Gibson said. “I looked into it a lot more, and I put together a petition, which I had about 70 of my classmates and a few adults sign.”

Idea begins its journey

Gibson sent the petition to Rep. Patti Fritz (DFL-Faribault), who is a licensed practical nurse and represents District 26B, which includes Blooming Prairie.

She got back to him “within a couple of days,” he said, and the pair began to work together on the issue, such

Joe's Story: Idea to Law

as meeting with representatives of the American Red Cross, Mayo Clinic and Memorial Blood Centers. Some pediatricians (doctors specializing in diseases of young people) had concerns over lowering the donation age to 15. In a lesson of compromise, Gibson suggested 16.

The bill was introduced in the House as HF1066 on Feb. 19, 2007, with Fritz

as its sponsor. One year later, during the second year of the biennium, Sen. Kathy Sheran (DFL-Mankato) sponsored the Senate version, SF2471, on Feb. 12, 2008.

The bills breezed through the committee process, approved by the House Health and Human Services Committee and the Senate Health, Housing and Family Security Committee



Photo by Andrew VonBank

Gov. Tim Pawlenty hands Joe Gibson the pen he used to sign SF2471 into law on March 18, 2008, as Rep. Patti Fritz, left, and Sen. Kathy Sheran look on.

Joe's Story: Idea to Law

without objection. The Senate version was passed 64-0 by the full Senate on March 6, 2008, and 132-0 by the House one week later. Gibson was in the House gallery to see the House vote.

Gibson, an aspiring attorney, had a former top legislator in his corner.

Former House Speaker Steve Sviggum sat next to Joe at the health committee hearing, and cited the good reasons for the bill.

Sviggum, who serves on the Board of Directors of the North Central Region of the American Red Cross Blood Services, said there are about 4,000 blood drives annually in the state, 330 of which are in high schools.

“High school juniors and seniors are very, very good at getting their colleagues and friends to donate,” Sviggum said.

Democrat and Republican House members gave kudos to Gibson for his determination.

“What a great effort on your behalf to really show everybody in this state what government is like when it works, when people have good ideas and they bring them to people who are willing to work on their cause,” said Rep. Brad Finstad (R-Comfrey). “Congratulations.”

Rep. Neva Walker (DFL-Mpls) encouraged Gibson to keep fighting for his beliefs.

“I remember being 16, and I didn’t think like you even though I knew the Capitol was here. For myself, I was just like, ‘OK, I can get my friends to donate blood and I’ll wait until I turn 17.’ Hopefully, this won’t be the last time that you come to change our laws and improve our government. Maybe, in a few more years you’ll come as a member.”

True or False

1. It is legal in Minnesota for 15-year-olds to donate blood.
2. Steve Sviggum who favored Joe’s idea is a former governor.
3. Joe’s bill, HF1066, became law in 2007.
4. Joe’s idea came from a desire to help his ill grandfather.

For answers, see page 15

Legislative Terms

The following are some terms used as part of the legislative process.

adjourn: to conclude a day's session or committee meeting.

amend: the action of adding, omitting or altering language of a bill.

bicameral: a legislature containing two houses.

biennium: 1) the two-year period by which the state budget is set. Money is appropriated for a two-year budget cycle during the odd-numbered years. The fiscal biennium runs from July 1 in an odd-numbered year to June 30 in the next odd-numbered year. 2) the two-year legislative term, which begins in January of an odd-numbered year and ends in December of an even-numbered year.

bill: a proposal calling for a new law, a change in current law, the repeal of current law or a constitutional amendment.

caucus: 1) a group of House members of the same political party or faction such as the "DFL Caucus," the "Republican Caucus," the "Majority Caucus" or the "Minority Caucus"; 2) a meeting of such a group.

chief sponsor: the main sponsor of a bill.

committee or division: a group of senators or House members that hear bills, make preliminary decisions about them and report to the legislative body as a whole.

companion bills: identical bills introduced in the House and Senate.

conference committee: a group of either three or five members from each body that work out a compromise when the House and Senate pass different versions of a bill.

floor: after a bill passes through the committee process, it is sent to the "floor" in either the House or Senate, meaning it is placed on any of the various bill lists while awaiting debate by all members.

hearing: regularly scheduled meeting of a committee or division at which the public has an opportunity to voice its opinions about proposed legislation.

House file or Senate file: the number assigned to a bill before it is introduced. It is listed at the top of the bill. HF2379 or SF5143, for example.

Legislative Terms

introduced (n., introduction): the formal presentation of a bill to a body of the Legislature. The bill gets its first reading at this time and is then referred to a committee or division.

legislature: name for the entire group of senators and representatives.

lobbyist: a person acting individually or for an interest group who tries to influence legislation.

majority: the party that has the most members elected in either the House or the Senate.

minority: the party that has the fewest members elected in either the House or Senate.

omnibus: a term used to describe tax, education, appropriations and other bills that may contain many different proposals.

page: a person employed by the House or Senate to run errands, assist committees, and perform a variety of other legislative tasks.

President of the Senate: the person who presides over Senate floor action and debate.

sine die: when the Legislature adjourns “without a day,” in the even-numbered years, the second year of the biennium.

Speaker of the House: the person elected by members of the House of Representatives to preside over House floor action and debate.

veto: the constitutional power of the governor to refuse to sign a bill, thus preventing it from becoming law unless it is passed again (with a two-thirds majority) by both houses of the Legislature.

Quick Facts:

Minnesota is divided into 67 Senate districts, and each of those districts is divided into two sections. Voters elect one House member from each section and one senator from the district.

Each district holds about 73,425 people, and each section holds about half the number. So, the more populated the area, the smaller in geographical size is the district. In 2009, districts ranged in size from 2 square miles (61A) to 9,646 square miles (6A). New district boundary lines are drawn every 10 years after an official count of the people (a census). The district lines may shift to reflect the change in population.

Word Matching

Match the definition to the correct term.

Minnesota's supreme document

legislature

Legislative information source

majority

Minnesota's highest elected official

bill

Two-year meeting of the legislature

gallery

Governor's rejection of a bill

session

House and Senate

lobbyist

Lead political party

constitution

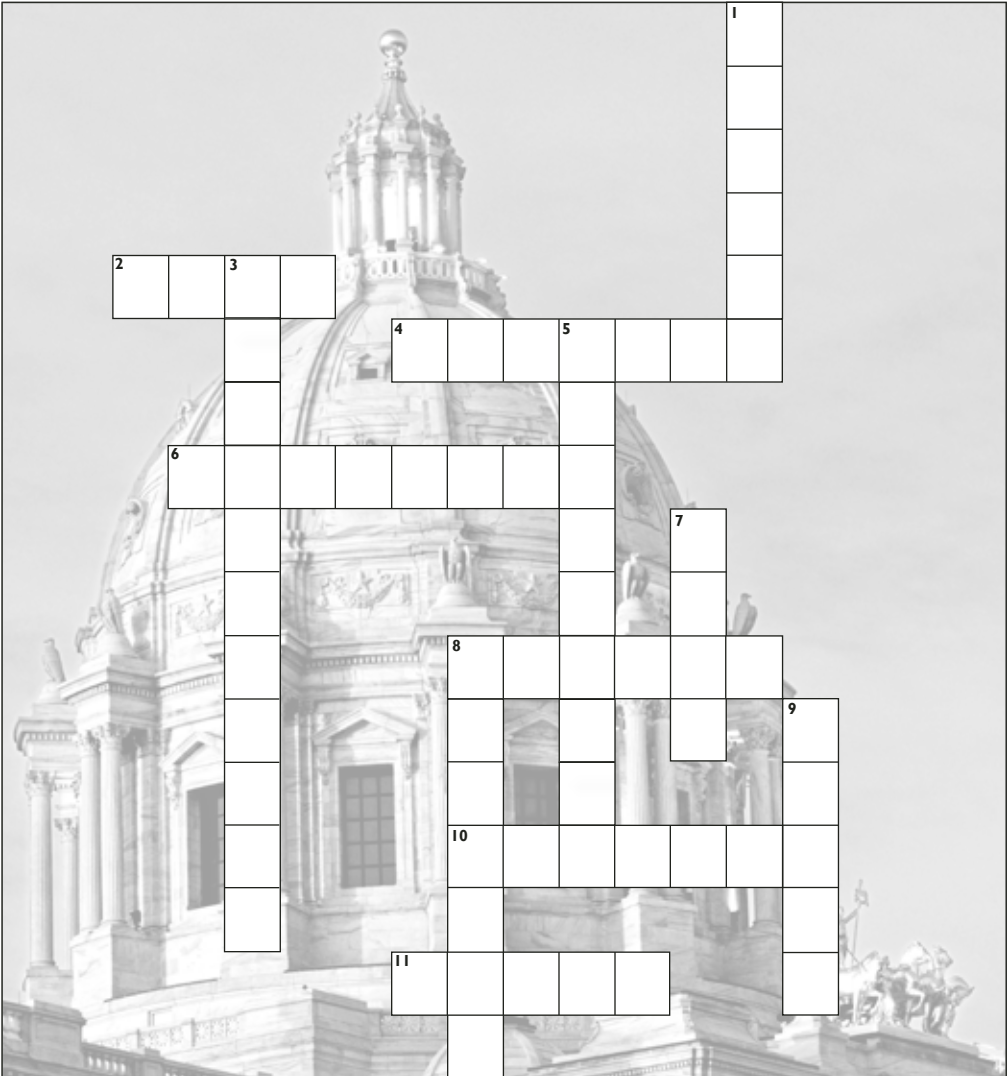
Idea in legal form

governor

Public balcony in House and Senate chambers

veto

Legislative Crossword Puzzle



Across

- 2. idea in legal form
- 4. a bill's journey
- 6. two-year period of the legislative session
- 8. body with 67 members
- 10. "without a day"
- 11. body with 134 members

Down

- 1. members of the same political party group
- 3. all senators and representatives
- 5. bill of similar language
- 7. governor's rejection
- 8. yearly or daily meeting
- 9. alter bill language

Contact Your Legislator - Get Involved



What you have to say matters, and you may want to contact your legislator about a bill making its way through the process, or an idea you have for a new law.

You can learn who your representatives are by going to the Legislature's Web site, www.leg.mn. Once the page opens, click on "Who Represents Me?" and you will next be on the page where you put in your address and click. On the page that opens, you will see a map with a red star that marks where you live. Next to the map you will see a photo and information about your state representative. Below that you will see a photo and information about your state senator. If you would like to learn more about the person, just click on "MEMBER PAGE."

Fill in the blanks:

My state representative is

My state senator is

Write a letter

In this time of electronic communication, a handwritten letter would definitely catch attention.

Tips:

- Be respectful
- Be brief
- Make your letter neat and easy to read (type or print).

You can also e-mail your representative once you know their name. The addresses follow this format:

Rep.first name.last name@house.mn

Make a call

You can always call your representative. You may not speak immediately to her or him, but you can leave a message, or speak with their legislative assistant

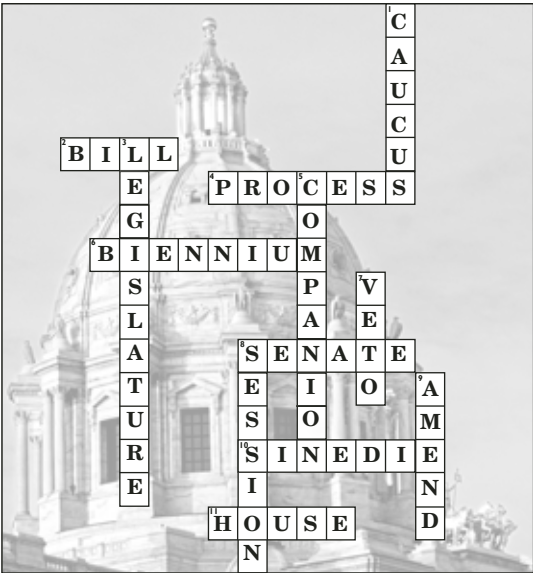
Puzzle Answers

Word Matching

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House and Senate
Lead political party
Idea in legal form
Public balcony in House and Senate chambers

legislature
majority
bill
gallery
session
lobbyist
constitution
governor
veto

Legislative Crossword Puzzle



True or False Answers

It's the Law

1. false
2. true
3. true
4. true
5. true

Joe's Story

1. false
2. false
3. false
4. true

**Go to the legislative Web site for
more information.**

**www.leg.mn
click on “Links for Youth”**



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