



RHODE ISLAND MEDICAL SOCIETY

A Lay Person's Guide to the "Sausage Making" at the General Assembly

Where do I begin?

Fire up your internet access and log in to www.rilin.state.ri.us

How do I know what bills have been introduced?

Click on "legislation" on the dark blue bar

Under "2016 Legislative Session information," click on "daily introductions"

Each chamber has a list of the days they have met; each day has the bills introduced that day.

Each bill has a brief descriptor or headline; click on the bill number and you will get the full text.

(The last page of every bill has a description of what the bill is intended to accomplish. Like newspaper headlines, these descriptions may not accurately reflect the bill's content, however.)

OR

Use the "bill text" tab for each chamber; however, the often confusing descriptions will not be much help in weeding out the bills you don't care about. You only get a numeric list, and you would have to open each bill to see what is really in it.

Legislation is formatted as follows: new language is highlighted in blue and language that is to be removed or replaced is shown with a strike-through. At the top of each bill you will find which committee the bill has been assigned to for a hearing.

What if I know the bill sponsor's name?

Click on "legislation" in the dark blue bar.

Under "2016 Legislative Session information" click on "bill status/history"; move your cursor to "bill sponsor" and a drop-down will appear with the sponsor's name.

Hint! Before hitting enter, check the box "prime sponsor"; each legislator may be a co-sponsor on many, many bills, so the "prime sponsor" is an excellent filter.

Now that I know the numbers of the bills that interest me, then what?

Under "legislation," go to "2016 Legislative Session information"

To track the status of the bill, click on "bill status/history" and type in the bill number(s) where it says "bills."

You will be able to put in dozens of bill numbers separated by commas. You will find the date the bill was introduced, the committee to which it was referred, and the dates of any action taken on the bill.

How do our elected officials actually make legislative "sausage"?

Each chamber creates and operates under its own rules. For sausage production purposes, the nuances of those rules are not worth boring you.

Each chamber requires every bill to receive a Committee hearing if the sponsor requests one.

A bill is generally not voted upon at the same Committee meeting when it is heard. Thus most "bill status/history" queries will indicate that the bill has been held for further study (or "HFS" in lobbyist jargon).

“What is the Committee process?” you might wonder at this point.

Remember the “legislation” click? And the “2016 Legislation Session information” click?

That is where you will find a particular committee’s agenda. It is not referred to as an agenda but rather a Committee Calendar. Now that you know this part of the General Assembly code, click on “Committee Calendars.”

Now you are getting into the meat of the legislative process. The “Committee Calendars” list:

- the hearing date with the time it was posted to this site
- the committee name
- the scheduled time of the hearing (generally referred to an estimated time)
- whether or not the original posting has been revised, e.g. bills added or deleted
- a viewing option, PDF or HTML, and
- the location of the hearing.

Go ahead, live large and click on one of your “view” options to see an actual, real-life virtual committee posting.

The heading of the calendar is pretty standard, restating what you saw on the previous web page. It gets interesting, however, when you get to the next heading before the actual bill numbers: “scheduled for.” There are three options at this point:

1. *Scheduled for hearing and/or consideration*: this most popular option means the committee will hear **and** they could vote on (“consider” -- more GA code) the bill.
2. *Scheduled for consideration*: you guessed it, all the committee will do is vote on these bills.
3. *Scheduled for hearing*; easy enough to figure that one out.

How does the committee process contribute to the sausage process?

When “considering” a bill, the committee may choose to amend the bill; if the amendment is relatively minor the bill number will also be amended, e.g. bill # 1235 “as amended,” or 1235 aa.

If the amendment is significant, bill #1235 would become #1235 “Substitute A” (Sub A).

Can I help make the sausage in the committee?

Of course you can, because hearings are open to the public, and you now possess the ability to find a bill and figure out where and when it will be given a hearing. Simply show up prepared to watch, speak, or offer written testimony. You will need to sign up for the latter two options. Witness sign-up forms are available in the hearing room.

Have we made the sausage yet?

Not quite. Once the Committee has heard the bill, they will need to vote on it. Generally, only those bills that are expected to make it to the floor (more code: it means be referred back to the respective chamber) actually get voted on. The bill, either amended or in its original form, is then “reported” to the floor with the recommendation for passage from the committee.

You can track the actual committee votes by clicking on “committee votes” to see the total count and who voted how on the bill.

Patience, getting closer

The bill has been reported out of committee to the floor...remember the "2015 Legislative Session information" click?

Look for "Floor Calendars," and you will see what bills are being considered by the entire body on a given day.

Bills that pass are then "transmitted" to the other chamber, where the whole process of assigning the bill to a committee, scheduling hearings, reporting to the floor, etc., happens all over again.

IT IS SAUSAGE, when . . .

When the bill passes both chambers of the General Assembly.

Spoiler Alert:

Click on "legislation" for the last time.

Go to the very bottom of the page, large blue box

Click on "bill tracker," and set up an account

Enter the bill numbers you wish to track and you will be alerted when the bills are scheduled for hearings or consideration.

Understanding the transparency of the General Assembly website demystifies the legislative process and ensures that you have the tools to participate in the democratic process.

For any questions or a verbal tutorial, call RIMS' Director of Government Relations and Public Affairs, Steve DeToy @ 401.965.8885.