

How a Bill Becomes a Law

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Remember those high school civics lessons about how a bill becomes law?

Forget them.

If you want to know how the process really works in the Oregon Legislature, you need to learn from the pros - not the textbooks.

The first step in fashioning an idea into state law, said former lobbyist Chuck Sheketoff, is finding a supportive House or Senate member. "It's not going to go anywhere unless it has a champion," he said.

Preferably the champion is from the party in control of the Legislature.

Citizens first should look to one of their own representatives, suggested Sen. Peter Courtney, D-Salem.

A lawmaker can order the Legislative Counsel's office to do a legal analysis and put the proposal in proper bill form. With a written bill in hand, even in draft form, a citizen has instant credibility for their proposal, Courtney said.

One of the "best-kept secrets" is to start the process well before the Legislature hits Salem, during the 18-month interim period, Courtney said. "You can get an awful lot done down there when there's not a lot of pressure on."

The next step is lining up support from citizens, interest groups and other lawmakers. Find co-sponsors from both parties and both chambers, Courtney advised. Try to get the news media to take notice of the bill, Sheketoff urged. Even if the average citizen doesn't read about a news conference or publicity stunt, daily newspaper clips are delivered to each lawmaker's desk, and they read them.

Backers need to show there's a problem in the community and the bill will fix it, said Bill Perry, lobbyist for the Oregon Restaurant Association. When the association sought to include tips as

part of the calculations for minimum wages, it recruited waiters and waitresses to testify how the bill might help rather than hurt them.

You need to show it's not a personal gripe, but a problem affecting a broad swath of the community, Perry said.

In Oregon, getting the bill to the right committee is crucial. If it goes to the wrong committee, that's the kiss of death. No bills are amended on the House or Senate floor, so the committees are the workhorses of the Legislature, and the filters through which all bills must pass.

Again, here's where the legislative champion is so important. "Having an insider is like having a traffic cop on the scene who can help move traffic," said former Rep. Kevin Mannix, R-Salem. The insider can "cash in a chit or two" to get the bill to the right committee, or get the committee leader to consider the bill. That insider can speak up in party caucus meetings to let colleagues know the bill is a priority, or flag the attention of the chamber leaders.

Campaign donations aren't allowed while the Legislature is in session. But most lawmakers pay attention to constituent letters, or a parade of witnesses offering testimony.

E-mail isn't very effective, because it never makes it into the folders lawmakers use to keep records on each bill, Sheketoff said. "Those bill folders are looked at in caucuses," he said.

When a hearing is arranged, provide polite but compelling testimony and leave written copies for lawmakers, Courtney said. Stress your dedication to the bill, so lawmakers know you'll keep after them.

If interest groups raise objections to a bill, that could mean a quick defeat. Try to find out what their problems are and address them, Mannix said.

Often deals are cut in the corridors outside committees, in lawmakers' offices or in work groups of lobbyists and committee staffers. Get to know all those players, Mannix said. Buttonhole and cajole them. Befriend secretaries who can provide five minutes with the committee chairman.

Finally, be persistent but patient. That means being prepared to try again the next session if the proposal doesn't fly the first time, Courtney said. A 1999 bill partially deregulating Oregon's electricity industry took years, spread over multiple legislative sessions, to pass. But others, such as one designating the golden chanterelle as the official state mushroom, were far easier.