Managing Legislative Time

The efficient use of time is essential for any legislature.

By Brenda Erikson

Tools of the Trade

Time is one of the most precious commodities for legislatures, especially for part-time legislatures.

"Perhaps the most trying aspect of a legislator's life is the frustration born of inadequate time to cope with the flood of issues and problems that a session involves," says Duane Lockard, a former Connecticut senator.

So lawmakers have adopted processes to maximize the use of legislative time—both in planning the overall session and managing work on the floor. And while these mechanisms are effective tools when properly used, they are not an automatic panacea. Direction on the part of leaders and discipline on the part of members is essential to their success. Here are some things to try:

1. Organize early. Early organization of the legislature usually leads to more efficient use of legislative time. Legislatures that meet to organize before the regular session believe that it helps preserve short sessions and part-time schedules by making better use of the early days or weeks of session. "Early organization is the linchpin, because so many other workload management procedures are tied to it," says John Phelps, clerk of the Florida House.

2. Allow bill prefiling. This process allows bills to be prepared and introduced before regular session convenes. It increases the efficiency of the legislative process in several ways:
   - Legislative staff usually have more time to draft legislation.
   - The paperwork that is necessary for a bill’s official introduction—for example, gathering sponsor signatures—can be completed early.
   - Presiding officers have more time to consider to which committee a bill will be referred.

3. Establish deadlines. Since proper planning is absolutely essential for the orderly flow of legislative business, most chambers have instituted deadline systems that require completion of certain activities by set dates before the session’s end. Thus, the legislature’s work occurs in stages that offer a reasonable amount of time for both study and compromise.

The five most common deadlines are for:
   - Bill introductions,
   - Committee action,
   - Action by the house of origin,
   - Second house action,
   - Conference committee action.

Mark Brandsgard, administrative assistant to the House minority leader in Iowa, says deadlines are “designed to funnel legislation down to major issues as the session progresses.”

Administrative Assistant

Mark Brandsgard

Iowa

House Clerk

John Phelps

Florida

Planning the Overall Session

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that precipitate little, if any, discussion. A consent calendar identifies uncontested or noncontroversial legislation and speeds its consideration on the floor. It is not uncommon for an entire consent calendar to be passed with one vote of the body—rather than by individual votes on each item.

- Special order calendars are used to "pull" selected legislation from the regular order of business. These calendars keep the consideration of important bills from being delayed by less critical measures.

2. Control debate. Most legislative chambers try to save floor time by limiting debate. Parameters on how often and how long a member may speak are common. Typically, a member is allowed to speak only once or twice per question, and from five to 15 minutes.

Legislatures also manage their floor time by establishing mechanisms to end debate. Most commonly, this is accomplished by a motion calling for the previous question. Legislative bodies may select a specified time at which to end debate on a particular issue or calendar—say, at 4 p.m. They also may limit the amount of discussion. For example, in the Alabama House, debate on the special order calendar used to be unlimited, but it is now limited to two hours.

3. Limit congratulatory bills and ceremonial presentations. Personal, congratulatory, ceremonial or courtesy resolutions or presentations may cover anything from weddings to births to high school athletic victories. Although individuals or organizations may deserve recognition, legislatures are finding the cost—in time and dollars—to be prohibitive. As a result:

- Most chambers rarely present personal or congratulatory instruments during a ceremony on the floor. In the Alabama House, for example, presentations and appearances by noted individuals occur during the 30 minutes before session begins. The speaker of the House presides over the "pre-session events," which are attended by interested members and staff.

- Many legislative assemblies impose a deadline by which personal or congratulatory instruments must be introduced or limit the number that may be offered.

- More chambers now use citations, certificates of recognition or other documents that do not require formal introduction, committee hearing, floor debate or vote.

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