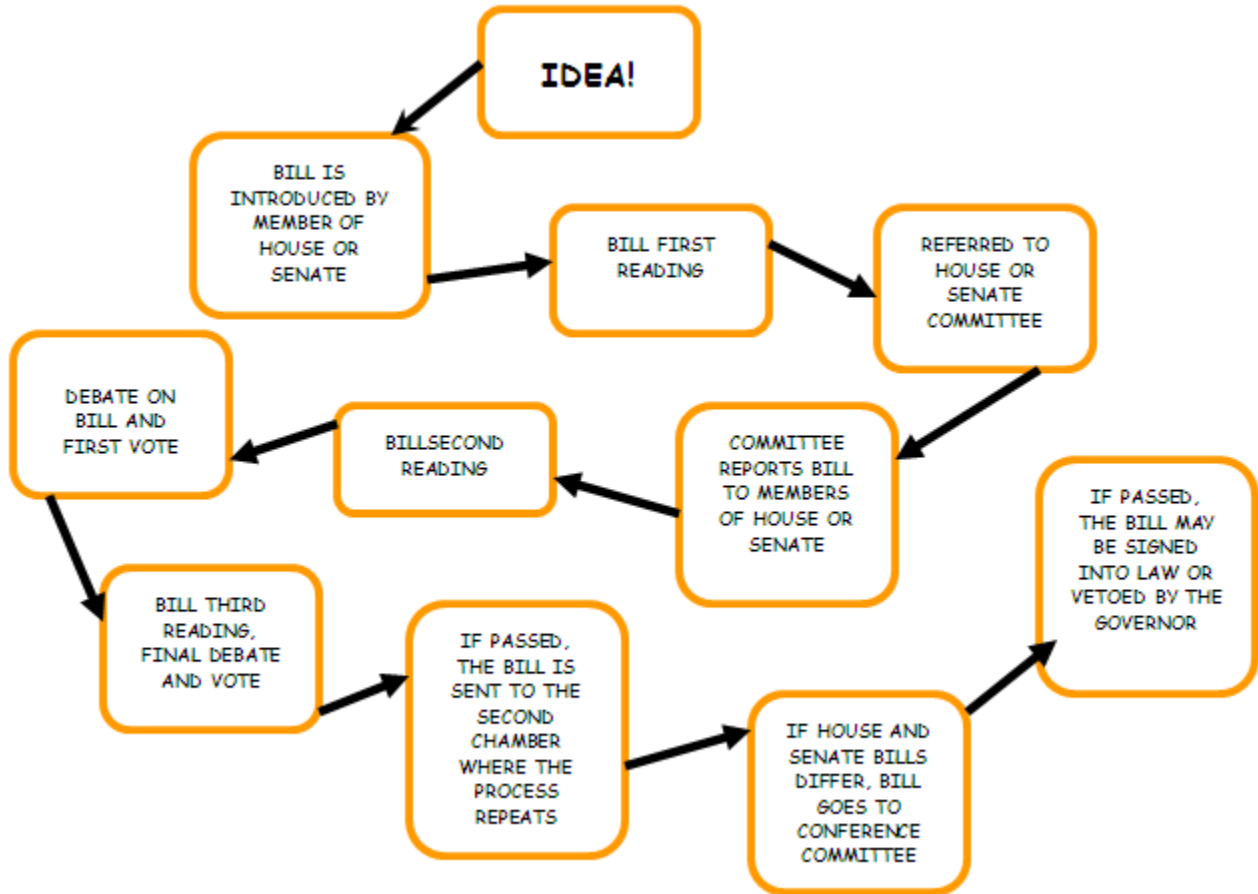


## How a Bill Becomes a Vermont Law...

...it all starts with an idea...an idea which could be yours!



## Three Branches of Government

The founders of Vermont, like the founders of the United States, wanted to ensure that there was a strong government, but they did not want any one individual or group to become too powerful. Therefore, in the Vermont Constitution they established a government with three separate branches. Each branch of government operates independently from the others, and its power serves as a check and balance for the powers of the other branches. This ensures that no one branch can take too much control. This is called the "separation of powers."

The three branches of government are:

**Executive** - The executive branch administers and enforces the laws passed by the legislature. The Governor is the head of the executive branch and oversees the many state agencies that do the work of the state government.

**Judicial** - The courts interpret the meaning of laws and apply those laws to specific cases. The court can also invalidate a law if it finds that it is inconsistent with the constitution.

**Legislative** - The legislature adopts laws. Some laws establish rules and policies that govern our behavior, such as criminal laws or environmental laws. Other laws establish how the government will spend tax money (the budget bill), and how those taxes will be raised (the tax bill). Different laws are made every year to respond to the changing needs of Vermonters.

## How Vermont Laws are Made...

Vermont's laws are prepared and adopted by legislators who are elected every two years by people in their communities. Vermont's [legislative session](#) runs from January until any time between mid-April and early June, depending upon when the legislators finish their work.

Vermont's legislature is [bicameral](#), meaning that it has two chambers: the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#). A bill can be introduced in either chamber (except for spending bills which can only start in the House). In order for it to become a law, both chambers must pass the bill with a majority of the vote, and the Governor must sign it or allow the bill to become a law without signature.

## It All Starts With an Idea...

All laws get their start as someone's idea. An idea begins as a [bill](#), and once it is approved by the House and the Senate and the Governor, it becomes a law. An idea for a bill may come from anybody; however, only legislators can introduce a bill in Vermont's legislature. There is always a way to get a bill introduced if enough legislators support it.

Usually [resolutions](#) honor individuals or organizations, or express the opinion of the legislature on issues before the United States Congress or other national or international bodies. Resolutions can be done jointly between the House and Senate, or they can be made concurrently by each body. Simple resolutions come from only one of the bodies of the legislature.

Legislators take ideas for laws and ask the [Legislative Council](#) to write them up as bills. Once they are prepared, bills can be introduced in the House or the Senate - except for spending (\$\$\$) bills which start in the House as required by the Vermont Constitution.

## The Idea Becomes a Bill...

A legislator or committee of legislators must officially [introduce](#) the bill by becoming the bill's [sponsor](#). Representatives and Senators who sponsor bills will try to gain support for them by getting others to sign on as additional sponsors of the bill.

The title of the bill is read during a session of the House or Senate. This is called "first reading" of the bill.

Legislators are members of [legislative committees](#). Committees address different areas such as education, agriculture, and transportation, among others. After a bill is introduced, it is assigned to a committee by the [Speaker of the House](#) or by the [Lieutenant Governor](#). The [President Pro Tempore](#) of the Senate assigns the bill to a committee if the Lieutenant Governor is unavailable.

## The Bill Goes to Committee...

Committees may hold [hearings](#) and invite members of the public and [lobbyists](#) to provide information and express their opinions on a bill. This is the only time the public can give [testimony](#) on a bill, although throughout the process members of the public and lobbyists can talk or write to individual legislators to try to persuade them to support, reject, or change a bill.

Following testimony and discussion, the committee will decide what to do with the bill. The committees often make changes to the bill which is referred to as "[marking up the bill](#)."

## The Bill Leaves the Committee...

Next, the committee decides what to do with the bill. It can pass a bill out [favorably](#), [unfavorably](#), or [without any recommendations](#); or it can [table](#) the bill or choose not to discuss a bill (both of which mean that the bill [dies in committee](#)).

Depending upon what the bill is about, a second committee (or even a third committee) can ask that the bill be sent to it for discussion and amendment (or to [kill the bill](#)).

## The Bill is Read on the Floor for a 2nd and 3rd Time...

Every bill gets debated and voted on twice by each chamber of the legislature. After going through the entire process, the bill (as amended by the committee) is sent to the floor for [second reading](#), debate, and [third reading](#).

Before a bill is reported for the second or third time on the floor by the [reporter](#) of the House or Senate, it is put on the [notice calendar](#) to warn legislators, lobbyists, and the public when it will be debated and voted upon.

After the second reading and before the legislators vote on the bill, a [floor debate](#) may occur. Legislators argue in favor of or against the bill and they can propose amendments to the bill. The Speaker or Lieutenant Governor will only allow amendments that are [germane](#).

## Legislators Debate, Amend, and Vote on the Bill...

Legislators may ask members of the committee to explain parts of the bill. Sometimes the House or Senate will [recess](#) in the middle of a debate on a bill. During the recess members of the public, lobbyists, and legislators try to convince other legislators to vote in support of or against the bill.

When the legislators are satisfied that there has been sufficient debate, they can call for a vote on the bill. If the bill is controversial, legislators can call for a [roll call vote](#). A non-controversial bill has votes cast by voice vote ("all in favor say 'aye'").

If the bill passes second reading and the majority of legislators vote yes on the bill, it is then put on the notice calendar for third reading where additional debate may occur. After the third reading, no amendments can be made to the bill. Then a final vote is taken on the bill.

If the bill passes, it is sent by the [House Clerk and Secretary of the Senate](#) to the other chamber of Vermont's legislature. For example, House bills will be sent to the Senate and Senate bills will be sent to the House. If the vote is no, then the bill has been killed.

## The Bill Goes to the Second Chamber...

When a bill passes the House it is then sent to the Senate, and vice-versa. In the new chamber it is given first reading then it is referred to a committee.

The committee can choose whether they want to work on the bill or ignore it, just like in the committees of the first chamber. The public, lobbyists, and legislators are once again given an opportunity to comment on the proposal. During this time, the committee can amend or even kill the bill.

Once the committee has completed its consideration of the bill it can choose to send it on to the floor for a vote, unless it is sent to another committee for additional review.

As in the first chamber, the bill is given second reading and is debated and perhaps amended. Finally, it is given a third reading and a final vote by the second chamber.

## The Bill Goes to Conference Committee and is Given a Final

### Vote...

If members of the House and Senate pass two bills that are exactly the same, it is sent to the Governor for signature. If the bill that passed the House is in any way different from the bill that was passed by the Senate (perhaps because it was amended by the committee or on the floor) then a [conference committee](#) is appointed to try to come up with a compromise that members of both the House and Senate would agree upon.

If the conference committee comes up with a compromise, the bill is sent back to the House and the Senate for a final vote. Individual legislators can vote in favor of or against the bill or they may [abstain](#) from voting. If the bill passes with a majority of the vote in both chambers, it is sent to the Governor.

## The Bill Goes to the Governor

When a bill goes to the Governor, the Governor must choose whether to sign the bill, [veto](#) it, or let it become a law without a signature.

If the Governor vetoes the bill, the House and the Senate can vote to override the veto. It takes a vote of 2/3 of the legislators in each chamber to override a veto. When the Governor signs the bill, it becomes a law. If the Governor does not sign the bill and does not veto it within five days after receiving it, it also becomes a law.

Generally, bills can be introduced only during the early part of the legislative session. Bills that are not passed within the two-year legislative session cannot be carried forward to the next legislative session, although a legislator can decide to reintroduce a bill.

DID YOU KNOW?

In an average legislative session (two years), about 1,000 bills are introduced. Generally less than 1/5 of those bills pass and become law.

## Words to Know

**Abstain:** To choose not to participate.

**Bicameral Legislature:** A legislature with two separate chambers, each of which participate in the making and adoption of laws.

**Bill:** A bill is a proposed law.

**Conference Committee:** A conference committee is made up of three senators and three representatives who are appointed by the leadership of their chambers.

**Dies in committee (Kill the Bill):** A bill that dies in committee is not returned to the House or Senate for debate and/or vote.

**Floor Debate:** Before a bill is voted on, legislators debate the bill by arguing in favor or against the bill. They also offer amendments.

**Germane:** Germane means "related to." An amendment is not germane if it is unrelated to the purpose of the bill.

**Hearings:** Meetings of a committee where the public is invited to comment on proposed legislation, public issues or policy decisions.

**House Clerk and Secretary of the Senate:** The House Clerk and Secretary of the Senate are elected by the legislators to help keep track of bills, resolutions, votes, and the proceedings of the legislators, and to prepare calendars and journals.

**House of Representatives:** There are 150 representatives that make up the Vermont House and they each represent about 4,000 citizens.

**Introduce:** The first formal step in the process of lawmaking. A bill is introduced to the House or Senate for consideration and then sent to a committee for study.

**Legislative Committees:** A small group of legislators appointed to meet and discuss bills of a particular topic or type (e.g. Agricultural Committee).

**Legislative Council:** A team of lawyers and administrative staff who work with legislators to write bills and laws.

**Legislative Session:** The months in which legislators meet to discuss and pass laws for each of the two years. (A new legislature is elected every two years for a new legislative session).

**Lieutenant Governor:** Elected by the voters. He or she presides over the Senate unless he or she is Acting Governor (in the event of the death or incapacity of the Governor and when the Governor is out of state).

**Lobbyists:** Individuals who are paid or who spend over \$500 to influence legislators to pass or prevent passage of particular laws and policies. Lobbyists often work closely with legislators to help shape bills.

**Mark-up:** To amend or make changes to a bill while it is in committee.

**Notice calendar:** The notice calendar is published every day by the Legislative Council. It lists all the bills that are going to be debated and voted on the following day.

**Passed out favorably with amendment:** A committee vote to return the bill to the House or Senate with a recommendation that it be approved with changes made by the committee.

**Passed out favorably:** A committee vote to return the bill to the House or Senate with a recommendation that it be approved.

**Passed out unfavorably:** A committee vote to return the bill to the House or Senate with a recommendation that it not be approved.

**President Pro Tempore:** Serves in the Lieutenant Governor's place in his or her absence. Elected by members of the Senate.

**Recess:** A break from the meeting of the House or Senate.

**Reporter:** A legislator who is a member of the committee that is bringing the bill to the floor for a vote.

**Resolution:** A resolution is a declaration of the legislative body.

**Roll Call Vote:** When there is a roll call vote, the House Clerk or Secretary of the Senate reads off each legislator's name, and they answer Yea, Nay, or they can abstain (which means they do not vote). Only with a roll call vote will the public know how individual legislators voted on a particular bill.

**Second reading:** When the title of a bill is read on the floor of the House or Senate for the second time. (The first time is when it is introduced).

**Senate:** There are 30 senators in Vermont. Each senator represents about 20,000 people in a senatorial district (one or more counties).

**Speaker of the House:** Leader elected by the House of Representatives.

**Sponsors:** Legislators who propose a bill.

**Table the bill:** A bill that is tabled is kept in committee so that it never goes to a vote by the House or Senate. It can be called up again at any time.

**Testimony:** Statements made by people who participate in a legislative hearing.

**Third reading:** When a bill is read by title on the floor of the House or Senate for the third time. After third reading there is a final vote on the bill.

**Veto:** A veto is when the Governor decides not to sign a bill into law. The bill returns to the legislature where each house decides to sustain the veto or override it.

**Without any recommendations:** A bill that is sent back to the House or Senate for vote without a committee recommendation. This generally only happens when the committee cannot agree on what recommendations to make.