

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- Host a “meet and greet” or non-fundraising reception in your home.
- Send your legislator information and key articles relating to your concerns. Some actually read their mail!
- Keep up with the voting record of your legislator.
- Thank your legislator and the legislative assistant at the conclusion of the Session for all of their hard work and support.
- Stay on positive terms with your legislator even if they voted not to support your issue. Thank them for their hard work and consideration. They may be an ally some day!
- Volunteer to put a candidate’s yard sign in front of your house or a bumper sticker on your car.
- Volunteer to help the legislator’s campaign by stuffing envelopes, working the polls on Election Day, going door-to-door, or working on a telephone bank.

Contacting Your Legislator

Always contact your own legislator first, then legislators in neighboring districts. If you want to influence legislators from other areas, try to find someone in their district to contact them. Letters or calls from outside the district can help support letters from inside the district. However, if legislators only receive non-constituent contacts on an issue, they sometimes assume their constituents don’t care.

Writing to Your Senator or Delegate

A letter is an excellent tool for communicating your view in a clear and concise manner. A carefully written letter can explain an issue in detail as well as provide valuable information to the legislator. Constituent letters are particularly effective, so encourage your friends and relatives to write letters as well. Here are a few tips for letter writers:

- Use the correct salutation.
- Type or neatly handwrite the letter. Form letters, retyped or not, are less persuasive, postcards and petitions even less so. Keep in mind that your legislator will likely determine how important the issue is by the amount of effort you spend on the letter.
- Check for spelling errors. Ask a friend to read it to make sure that it is easily understood.
- Make sure that you include your name, address and phone number. Date the letter.

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- Define the issue in the beginning of the letter. Legislators receive hundreds of pieces of mail every day during the Session. Make sure your point gets across quickly and clearly. Continue with supporting information in the body of the letter. Outline your concerns and explain the negative or positive impact that the piece of legislation would have on you and the community.
- Write about one issue at a time and include the bill number if possible.
- Be polite and ask for his/her support. Be clear about what you would like the Senator/Delegate to do. (support the bill, study the issue, etc.).
- Suggest new solutions. Legislators don't sit around creating legislation – the ideas come from people who have a good understanding of a specific topic.
- Be sure to share your opinion in a polite, positive way.
- Thank the legislators for their consideration and time.

During the session send mail to:

Senators
The Honorable _____
910 Capitol Square
Richmond, VA 23219
Salutation: Dear Senator

Delegates
The Honorable _____
PO Box 406
Richmond, VA 23203
Salutation: Dear Delegate

Calling Your Elected Official

A personal phone call to your representative is an effective way to voice your opinion. This is true especially when a bill is coming up for a vote and time is short. Calls, of course, are most effective when they follow a letter or personal visit. You should keep in mind that many of the techniques outlined in the section on letter writing and meetings also apply to telephone calls.

Be aware that you will only have a few minutes for the conversation so you will need to be well prepared and concise when expressing your view. Often an assistant will be the one to field your call, as your Senator or Delegate may not be available during the busy General Assembly Session. Many legislative assistants can be extremely helpful and can pass your name and concerns on to the legislator.

- Before you make the call, familiarize yourself with the issue and write down the points that you want to cover. It is unlikely you will be asked to explain the bill on the phone, especially if the office has received calls already on the same subject. You may only be asked if you are for or against the bill.
- Always be sure to identify yourself as a constituent. Be polite and considerate.
- Keep the conversation brief and to the point (under 5-10 minutes).
- If you cannot speak directly with the legislator, leave your message with the legislative assistant. Ask if there is a good time to call back.

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- Remember to thank the Senator, Delegate, or legislative assistant for their time and follow up the call with any information they requested and a brief thank you note.

Meeting with Your Legislator

One of the best ways to keep your legislator informed about your concerns is to visit them in person. Personal meetings, either to discuss a specific issue or just introduce yourself as a constituent, are the most effective means of political communication.

The best time to visit is when the General Assembly is not in Session. Information is gathered, legislation is drafted and agendas are set many months before the start of the General Assembly in January. The time to establish a rapport with your elected official is months before the Session starts. Here are a few pointers for a successful meeting.

- Call and set up an appointment. Be on time. Do not overlook the opportunity to meet with a legislative assistant, particularly if he or she is working closely with the legislator on an issue of concern to you.
- Review the issues and prepare yourself to discuss them clearly and briefly.
- Be able to state your views in fewer than 10 minutes outside the Session and fewer than 5 minutes during the Session.
- Introduce yourself and explain that you live and/or do business in his district.
- Answer any questions or concerns as completely as you are able. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it, and provide the information as soon as possible. All additional information requested should be provided promptly.
- Send information before the visit if possible and have a fact sheet of key points to leave with the legislator or legislative assistant at the conclusion of the meeting.
- After the meeting, send the legislator and assistant a thank you note along with any additional information they requested. Re-emphasize key points that were discussed. Often, it may be good to follow up with the legislative assistant after your initial meeting. A good assistant will always get your message to the legislator.
- Advise VOTA of your meeting and any specific requests or comments made by the legislator.

Target those legislators that have the most impact on your bills.

Many bills or amendments die in committee, and are never considered by the full House or Senate. Others die on the floor, and are never heard by the other committee. Make the best use of your time by finding out which committee – or subcommittee – your bill has been assigned to, and target those legislators who are in a position to make a difference. Some of those legislators will be from outside your area, and it is important to try to get constituents from those districts to write or call their legislators.

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

If you need to meet with your legislator during the Session remember that their schedules are hectic and unpredictable during the Session. The legislator's time is at a premium, and you must be specific about what you want and state it simply. It helps to have the bill number, a fact sheet, your position on the bill, and your name and number on a business card or note card that can be left with the Senator or Delegate.

The Legislative Process

The General Assembly is made up of two houses, the Senate and the House of Delegates.

- There are 40 Senators, elected to four-year terms.
- There are 100 Delegates, elected to two-year terms.
- The General Assembly meets annually, with Session starting on the second Wednesday in January. In even-numbered years legislators meet for 60 days and in odd-numbered years they meet for 45 days.
- The presiding officer of the House of Delegates is the Speaker of the House. He is a member of the House, elected to the Speaker's position by the other members of the House. The Lieutenant Governor is the presiding officer of the Senate. He is not a member of the Senate, and votes only in case of a tie.

A bill must follow a very specific process through the legislature.

- Bills are introduced and immediately assigned to a committee. Both the House and Senate have numerous standing committees that consider legislation on particular subjects: the House Health, Welfare, & Institutions Committee, or the Senate Finance Committee, for example. A bill can be defeated by a negative vote in committee, or by a committee taking no action or passing a bill by indefinitely.
- If a bill passes out of committee, it appears on the daily calendar under the heading First Reading. No action is taken on first reading. It moves automatically to second reading.
- The next day, the bill appears on the calendar under the heading Second Reading. On second reading, amendments to the bill may be considered, and members may ask questions. The bill must receive a majority vote to move on to third reading.
- The following day, a bill appears on the calendar under the heading Third Reading. On third reading, no amendments can be made to the bill. Members

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

may speak to the bill, but may not ask questions of each other. If the bill receives a majority vote on third reading, it moves to the opposite chamber.

- A bill follows a slightly different procedure in its second chamber. The bill is read for the first time and then assigned a committee. If the bill is reported from committee, it appears on the calendar under Second Reading. No action is taken on second reading, and the bill moves automatically to Third Reading. On third reading, the bill may be debated, amended, passed, or killed.
- If the bill has passed both houses in identical form, it goes directly to the Governor for his signature.
- If the bill has changed as it passed through the second house, it returns to its house of origin to consider the amendments. If the House and Senate cannot agree on the amendments, a conference committee is appointed to work out the differences. If the conference committee can create a bill that meets the approval of both houses, it then goes to the Governor for his signature.
- If the Governor signs the bill, or fails to take any action on the bill, it becomes law. If he vetoes the bill, 2/3 of the members of each chamber must vote to override the veto for it to become law. If he proposes an amendment to the bill, and the amendments are accepted by both chambers, the bill becomes law as amended. If either chamber rejects the amendments, the Governor must decide whether to sign or veto the unamended bill.

Legislative Glossary

Acts of Assembly – Bills passed by the General Assembly and signed by the Governor.

Adjournment – Termination of a session for the day, with the hour and day of the next meeting being set prior to adjournment.

Adjournment Sine Die – The final adjournment of a legislative session.

Amendment – A change made to legislation in committee or on the chamber floor that adds to, revises, or deletes language.

Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute – A substantive redrafting of legislation, incorporating the changes in a new version referred to as a "substitute." An amendment in the nature of a substitute may be offered by a standing committee, conference committee, the Governor, or on the chamber floor by a member. It may be an entirely new piece of legislation.

Bill – A proposal to amend, repeal, or add sections to the *Code of Virginia* or the *Acts of Assembly*.

Calendar – The daily printed agenda of business for each house. Also contains scheduled committee meetings and public hearings.

Caucus – An informal meeting of a group of members, most often called on the basis of party affiliation or regional representation.

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Code of Virginia – Compilation of the laws of the Commonwealth arranged alphabetically by subject, with each subject heading being referred to as a "Title."

Committee – A group of legislators from the House of Delegates or the Senate organized for the purpose of considering and deciding on the disposition of a bill or resolution.

Committee Actions

Carry Over (Continue) – Action that removes a measure from consideration during an even-numbered year session and provides for its reconsideration at the next regular session of the General Assembly. No bill may be carried over in an odd-numbered year session. A carry-over bill retains its assigned bill number in the odd-numbered year session.

Fail to Report (Defeat) – Committee rejects a motion to report a bill to the full house.

No Action Taken – No motion is made on the bill and it dies at the time of the committee deadline.

Pass By Indefinitely (PBI) – Bill is killed.

Report – Majority of committee approves the bill and it is reported to the floor. Bill may be reported three ways: without amendment(s), with amendment(s), or with an amendment in the nature of a substitute. A bill may also be reported and referred to another committee.

Strike – Bill is removed from the docket. This action frequently occurs at the request of the patron.

Committee Docket – A list prepared by the committee clerk of all legislation pending before a standing committee or a subcommittee. The chairman of the committee determines the order in which bills will be considered.

Conference Committee – An even number of legislators, half from the House and from the Senate, who meet to resolve differences between versions of a specific bill or joint resolution passed by their respective bodies. This usually includes three members from each body.

Effective Date – Date on which a Chapter of the *Acts of Assembly* becomes a law. Laws become effective July 1 in the year they are passed, unless otherwise specified. Laws passed at a special session become effective on the first day of the fourth month following adjournment, unless otherwise specified.

Emergency Clause – Due to an emergency, the law becomes effective when signed by the Governor.

Engrossed – Stage in the legislative process when a bill passes the second reading in the house of origin. If amended, the engrossed version of the legislation is printed incorporating all approved amendments. If not amended, the introduced version of the legislation becomes the engrossed bill, and if an amendment in the nature of a substitute is approved, the substitute becomes the engrossed bill.

Enrolled – Legislation which has passed both the House of Delegates and the Senate. It has been signed by the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate and it has been sent to the Governor, but not yet signed. If signed by the Governor, the bill becomes a law and a Chapter of the *Acts of Assembly*.

Legislative Intent – The purpose for which a measure is introduced and/or passed.

Motion to Reconsider – A motion which, if successful, returns the question to its status before the vote.

CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Patron – Legislator who introduces a specific piece of legislation. Other legislators may show their support by signing on as co-patrons.

Reading – The presentation of a bill before either house, requiring the reading and printing of bill number or title. This formal procedure is required by the Constitution and the Rules of each house, and indicates a stage in the enactment of a measure. The Constitution requires that bills receive three readings on three different days, or three printings, by title, on three different calendars in each house, unless the readings are waived.

Reconsideration – A motion which, when granted, results in another vote annulling or reaffirming an action previously taken. A motion to reconsider may be offered only by a member who voted previously on the prevailing side.

Reconvened Session – Veto session. A session, held on the sixth Wednesday after adjournment of each regular or special session, when the legislature meets to consider and act on the Governor's proposed recommendations to legislation and vetoed bills.

Referral – The assignment of legislation to a committee. In the House of Delegates, referral is initially made by the Speaker of the House. In the Senate it is made by the Clerk of the Senate.

Re-referral – In the House of Delegates, this is the re-assignment of legislation to the last committee that considered it. Re-referral is initiated by a member from the floor and a vote is taken. In the Senate, re-referral is the re-assignment of legislation to another committee. It is done by the committee that is considering it or by a member from the floor.

Resolution – Legislation requesting a study, or expressing legislative opinion or sentiment on a particular issue. Resolutions do not have the force of law and do not require the signature of the Governor. Constitutional amendments, however, are signed by the presiding officer of each house and are assigned chapter numbers.

Session – Period of time for which the legislature meets.

Subcommittee – A group of legislators who are selected by the committee chairman to form a smaller committee addressing certain categories of bills. Subcommittees make recommendations to the full committee.

Sunset – Expiration date of a legislative measure.

Suspension of the Rules – Parliamentary procedure whereby actions can be taken which would otherwise be out of order. A 2/3 vote is required to suspend the rules.

Veto – Action by which the Governor refuses to sign legislation passed by the General Assembly. The Governor returns the vetoed bill to its house of origin and a 2/3 vote of each body is required to overturn a veto.

Vote, Recorded – A roll call vote in which each member electronically votes yea, nay, or abstain. The vote is recorded in the Journal of each legislative body.

Vote, Voice – Oral expression of the members when a question is submitted for their determination. Response is given by "yeas" and "nays," and the presiding officer states his decision as to which side prevails. Only the result is recorded.