

What do Legislators do during their daily floor sessions?



constituents.

In the Senate, a senator is catching up on the reading the newspaper. Another senator is outside the chamber lobbying.

These are typical scenes from the place every legislative day. a lot of their work and spend a lot legislative chambers, the time spent there for daily sessions is what the public thinks of most.

The legislative chambers are located on the third floor of the State Capitol. The rotunda separates the two chambers; the Senate chamber is on the west side, and the House chamber is on the east side. Extensive renovations in recent years within the chambers as well as throughout the building have restored the original beauty of the Capitol, which was built in 1910.

The Senate chamber is horseshoe-shaped. The room is decorated in pastel green, and its woodwork is mahogany. Ornate stenciling and a mural adorn the high ceiling. Reproductions of the original antique chandeliers provide lighting.

Looking into the chamber from the back, the Republicans sit on the right side, and the Democrats sit on the left side. Each senator has a roll-top desk equipped with a microphone. The podium for the President of the Senate is front and center. In front of it is a large desk for the Secretary of the Senate and other legislative employees. To the President's right, there is an area reserved for members of the press. The Sergeants-at-Arms sit at desks by the main entrance.

The House chamber is larger than the Senate chamber and rectangular in shape. Its woodwork is quartersawn oak, and it is decorated in earth tones. Its furnishings and arrangement are similar to the Senate except the Republicans and Democrats sit on opposite sides. Along with the ornate stenciling, the ceiling of the House chamber contains

The image that usually comes to peoples' minds when they think about the state legislature is the image of legislators in the two legislative chambers. They are in a formal setting and surrounded by a flurry of activity. Say, for example, a representative is addressing the House with a long speech. At the same time, a group of representatives are gathered in the back of the chamber discussing a bill on which they will soon vote. Another representative is reading mail from her



be taken on a bill. One events of the day by is asking some of his particular bill. Yet another seeking information from a

daily sessions that take Though the legislators do of their time away from the

the largest mural in the Capitol. Unlike the Senate, the House is equipped with an electronic voting system. Large panels on either side of the podium display votes within seconds after they are cast.

With rare exceptions, no one but legislators and staff are permitted on the floors of the chambers. Although the public is not allowed to participate in debates occurring on the Senate and House floors, they are able to observe the proceedings. Both chambers are surrounded by a gallery, which is located on the fourth floor. The galleries provide ample seating and allow the public a bird's eye view of all that is taking place just below them on the Senate or House floor.

From time to time during a legislative session, members of both the Senate and House of Representatives meet together in a joint session. A prime example of this is on the first legislative day of every session, when members of both houses convene in the House chamber for the Governor's State-of-the-State address.

Legislators of both houses also come together once each year to honor former members of the South Dakota Legislature who have died during the past year. During these joint sessions, the President of the Senate presides and the Secretary and Chief Clerk record the proceedings. For the most part, however, the two legislative bodies do their work independently of each other.

The chambers come alive each legislative day at 2 p.m. At that time, the legislators, having just met in their respective caucuses, descend upon the House and Senate floors and are ready to begin their daily sessions.



Legislators begin the session each day with a prayer led by the designated chaplain of the day, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. The roll is called in their respective houses by the Secretary of the Senate and by the Chief Clerk of the House. When the formalities are complete, the lawmaking begins.

The focus shifts to the day's calendar. Calendars are prepared daily by the Secretary of the Senate and the Chief Clerk of the House. The purpose of the calendar is to inform legislators and other interested parties of the motions and resolutions, committee reports, consent calendar bills and resolutions, and second reading of bills and resolutions to be considered that day. The Secretary and Chief Clerk are directed in their preparation of the calendars by each house's calendar committee, which consists of the presiding officer, the majority leader, and the minority leader.

Most of the time spent in the daily sessions is devoted to the bills scheduled for second reading. Consent calendar bills are ordinarily read and voted on first. Then, one by one, the other bills are read the second time, debated, and ultimately voted upon.

One tool that legislators find very useful at this point is the Daily Reader. It is a publication containing the bills on that day's calendar in their current form. So, if a bill has been amended in a committee or on the other floor, legislators have quick access to this information. A separate Daily Reader is



prepared for each house, and it is distributed to the membership prior to the start of the daily session.

Early in the legislative session, the daily floor sessions are brief. Many bills have not yet been introduced or at least have yet to be heard in a committee so there is little work to do on the floors.

As time progresses, more and more bills begin to appear on the calendars, and legislators spend more time on the floors. Late in the session, the controversial bills, which tend to progress through the legislative process more slowly than other bills, reach the floors and elicit a lot of debate. The daily sessions may well extend into the evening hours. At this point, it is not uncommon for one or both houses to defer, or postpone, action on bills listed near the end of the calendar simply because the debates have run long and members are weary.

Generally speaking, most members of the Legislature already know how they are going to vote on a particular bill before it is ever debated on the Senate or House floor. This is due to the fact that some of them are members of the committee that heard the bill. Others likely discussed the bill with lobbyists or constituents and may have decided how to vote based on those discussions. Still others may have decided how to vote after attending their respective caucuses just prior to the start of the day's session.



This does not mean, however, that debates are without purpose or are never able to persuade members of the Legislature. Speeches given and questions asked by members of both houses on the floors are often used to draw media attention or garner public support for a particular point of view. They are also used to clarify certain aspects of a bill that may be vague or misleading.

All in all, the daily floor sessions give members of both houses the only chance they get during a legislative day to come together as a unit and discuss the issues at hand. They provide an arena for members to voice their views and cast their votes on the issues confronting the state.

A visitor to the State Capitol observing a daily session for the first time may find it chaotic and time-consuming. Legislators and those familiar with the legislative process, however, tend to look beyond the flurry of activity and the sometimes endless debates to the important role the daily sessions play in creating the laws of this state.