Inside the Chamber

SOUTH DAKOTA LEGISLATURE
LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH COUNCIL

STUDENT REFERENCE SERIES
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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 area is decorated in green tones 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. Along with the ornate stenciling, the ceiling of the House chamber contains the largest mural in the Capitol. Unlike the Senate, the House is equipped with an electronic voting system. A large panel on the left side of the podium displays votes within seconds after they are cast.

With rare exceptions, no one but legislators and staff are permitted on the floor of either chamber. 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, located on the fourth floor. The galleries provide ample seating to allow the public a bird's eye view of all that is taking place just below them on the Senate or House floor.

Occasionally during a legislative session, members of both the Senate and House of Representatives meet together in a joint session. An example of this is on the first legislative day of every session, when members of both houses convene in the House chamber to hear 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 of the Senate and the Chief Clerk of the House 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 or the Chief Clerk of the House. When the formalities are complete, the lawmaking begins.

At this point, the focus shifts to the day's calendar. Calendars are prepared by the Secretary of the Senate and the Chief Clerk of the House and are the agenda for the daily session. Items on the calendar may include: motions and resolutions; committee reports; consent calendar items; and, second reading of bills, resolutions and commemmorations. 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 acted upon.

Early in the legislative session, the daily floor sessions are brief. Most bills have not yet been introduced or 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 floor each day. Later in the session, the controversial bills, which tend to progress through the legislative process slower than other bills, reach the floors and provoke a lot of debate. The daily sessions may well extend into the evening hours. It is not uncommon for one or both houses to defer, or postpone, action on bills listed on the calendar simply because longer debates may not allow time for all bills to be acted on that day.

When the bill has had its second reading, legislators debate the positive and negative points of the particular legislation. Members speak one-at-a-time to express their views of the legislation. Each member may speak on the pending bill before any member is allowed to speak for a second time. No member may speak more than twice or longer than ten minutes on the same bill, without the consent of the majority of the members. However, a member may speak an additonal 20 minutes if the time is yielded by another member of the body who does not intend to speak on the bill. If a member wishes to ask a question, that member shall courteously do so through the presiding officer and with the consent of the member to whom the question is addressed. The presiding officer of each house rules on questions of order and preserves the decorum of the chamber. These daily sessions play an important role in creating the laws of this state.

Key Resources:
South Dakota Legislative Research Council

Key Terms:
bills
secretary of the senate
chief clerk of the house
debate
calendar
legislator
caucus
joint session
State of the State address
Senate
House of Representatives
Sergeant at Arms
President of the Senate
Speaker of the House
roll call vote

Did you know?

A "call of the house" is a procedure established in the Legislature's Joint Rules. It allows one-sixth of the members of either house to compel the attendance of those members absent. In those instances, the doors to the legislative chambers are closed, and members in attendance must remain in the chamber unless they get permission to leave from the presiding officer. At the same time, the sergeants at arms leave the chambers to go in search of the absent members and to bring them back to the chambers. Legislators do not utilize this procedure very often so when they do, it is quite memorable.

Only certain people other than current legislators are allowed on the floors of the Senate and House during sessions. They include former members of the Legislature, the current and former Governors and Lieutenant Governors, current and former members of Congress representing South Dakota, Supreme Court Justices, legislative employees, and news reporters.