

# **Process Committee Recommendations on the Role and Functions of Legislative Committees**

**Approved – 9/19/06**

The Oregon Legislative Assembly is the most important decision-making body in the state. It requires an effective and rational decision-making process and a more structured and disciplined approach to addressing and resolving the problems confronting Oregon. Strengthening the knowledge base of legislators is essential and will result in a higher level of institutional competence and improved policy decisions.

A hallmark of the Oregon legislative process has been its strong committee system. The legislature improves its' chances of producing thoughtful, meaningful, and productive legislation when its policy making and administrative functions align with both the informal norms of behavior and the formal rules of procedure adopted by each house. Nowhere are these elements more critical than in the committee process.

The following recommendations focus on two parts of the committee process which, taken together, will enable policy decisions to be made responsibly in a thoughtful, deliberative way.

- Policy processes relate to the content of legislation. The goal of improving the policy process is to strengthen and support the knowledge base of legislators and staff.
- Administrative processes relate to the management of legislation. A timely, efficient administrative process with sufficient checks and balances to limit unforeseen problems is the goal.

Recommendations 1. and 7. were included in the Commission's recommendation on Session Structure, but because they are also integral to the discussion of the role and function of legislative committees, they are repeated here.

## **Recommendations relating to Committees:**

- 1. Enhance member orientation curriculum to include more training in subject matter and procedural areas.**
- 2. Require substantive work plans for interim committees that prepare members for subsequent session work.**
- 3. Increase continuity of both members and staff from session to interim committees.**
- 4. Maximize use of consultative groups (work groups) and emphasize breadth of membership to reflect as many viewpoints in a policy discussion as possible.**
- 5. Require that minority parties select their own committee members in proportion to membership of the body.**
- 6. Keep at least a few policy committees open longer during session to ensure that legislators experienced in particular subject areas are working on related bills.**
- 7. Establish and adhere to firm deadlines for committee actions including bill introductions, hearing deadlines, work session deadlines and chamber cross-over dates.**
- 8. Make investments in the above items.**

## **Detailed Discussion of Each Recommendation:**

- 1. Enhance member orientation curriculum to include more training in subject matter and procedural areas.** As legislators begin their first, second, third or more session of service, it is

important to have a basic understanding of the major issues that might be addressed during session, which may require formal instruction by experts or field trips to affected areas of the state. In addition to subject area training, legislators should spend time learning how to be an effective committee member or chair including the process by which a bill becomes law and parliamentary procedures.

- 2. Require substantive work plans for interim committees that prepare members for subsequent session work.** Legislators have limited time during session to study and debate all major policy issues, particularly those of a complex technical nature. Therefore, the importance of interim committee work must be elevated. Committee work plans must be agreed upon prior to adjournment sine die and must include specific goals and strict timelines for bill draft requests and introduction. Committees must be authorized to meet as needed to discuss and develop policy proposals. All of these elements can be incorporated in joint resolutions passed by both houses.
- 3. Increase continuity of both members and staff from session to interim committees.** Committees serve as the principle vehicle for organizing information and policy discussions. Members can develop and build on a base of knowledge and expertise in a subject area when committee assignments are made that assure continuity of membership from session to interim to session. While it is important to match a member's educational, occupational or life experience with the committee, it is equally important to assign members with varied backgrounds who can provide a "fresh look" at issues. In the same vein, staff must be assigned to subject matter, not to the House or Senate, in order to follow the work through the process from one house to the other and from session committee to interim committee.
- 4. Maximize use of consultative groups (work groups) and emphasize breadth of membership to reflect as many viewpoints in a policy discussion as possible.** It is recommended that committee chairs and members make use of broad-based discussion groups to increase the participation of stakeholders in policy development and to solicit high quality in-depth information on complex topics, especially during the interim. Public comment is also to be solicited as appropriate. Though work groups will not always be able to resolve differences or present a consensus conclusion to legislators, they can provide more complete information on which to make decisions.
- 5. Require that minority parties select their own committee members in proportion to membership of the body.** In this representative democracy, it is important that views are represented proportionally in all discussions. As the leader of the whole house, a presiding officer must ensure that committees reflect the balance between parties, unless there is sufficient reason to make an exception regarding committee appointments. In any case, presiding officers must engage all members by assigning them to committees that make use of their strengths and interests, or in order to offer a unique perspective. The committee recommends that presiding officers and members of each body "institutionalize" the appointment of one or more members of a minority party to chair one or more significant committees or subcommittees.
- 6. Keep at least a few policy committees open longer during session to ensure that legislators experienced in particular subject areas are working on related bills.** As sine die approaches, the trend has been to funnel all substantive committee work to one or two committees rather than assign bills to standing committees that have been closed early. When this happens, legislators who are generally unfamiliar with the session history of measures, or who might want to move in a different direction from the standing committee, take up complex policy bills under time constraints and other pressures. In order to improve the development of public policy in the waning hours of session, it is recommended that more substantive committees remain open to consider associated legislation.

- 7. Establish and adhere to firm deadlines for committee actions including bill introductions, hearing deadlines, work session deadlines and chamber cross-over dates.** In order for committees and legislators to plan workloads, it is necessary to have a series of coordinated action deadlines. Deadlines will also be useful in limiting requests for drafting and introduction of measures, and requests for hearings and work sessions. All legislators, staff and the public should know the deadlines so that they can interact with committees in a timely manner. Deadlines should not be adjusted as the session progresses.
  
- 8. Make investments in the above items.** An effective committee process is critical to the success of the Oregon Legislative Assembly. With that said, it is important for legislators to invest appropriate time and financial resources into the process with the ultimate goal of strengthening the knowledge base of legislators resulting in a higher level of institutional competence and improved policy decisions.