



A servant's heart

The Montana Legislature – doing the people’s business in just 90 days

Beginning at noon on the first Monday in January in every odd-numbered year, 150 Montanans from all walks of life put aside their lives and livelihoods as ranchers, tribal leaders, nurses, lawyers, educators, housewives and retirees to convene in Helena for three months to do the people’s business as citizen legislators.

“Most of the people who come here have a true servant’s heart. They’re making a real sacrifice to be here to better our state and represent the people of Montana,” said Sen. Taylor Brown (R-Huntley), who is serving his first term in the state Senate.

For PPL Montana’s External Affairs staff, the part-time Legislature provides an informal setting with unfettered access to lawmakers who work without offices or paid staffs.

“We have ample opportunities to explain energy issues and discuss what PPL Montana is doing in the state, whether it’s community giving, conservation programs or our support of efforts to help the needy pay their heating bills,” said David Hoffman, director of External Affairs for PPL Montana.

“Still, coalitions and relationships take time to build, and it’s a real challenge to develop trust with people

you’re encountering for such a fleeting period,” he said.

Unlike most states, Montana’s Legislature meets for 90 scheduled days over a four-month period every other year, as required by state law and the state Constitution. The Legislature, which has 50 members in the Senate and 100 in the House of Representatives, governs fewer than a million people in legislative districts larger than some New England states.

“It’s a very intense time, packing the whole business of the state in 90 days every other year,” Brown said.

“Driving 300 to 400 miles to get here, leaving family and your way of life behind for four months, well, that’s stressful,” he said, describing how the worry can be seen in the faces of fellow lawmakers, particularly ranchers, who leave their businesses behind to serve.

“They know there’s someone at home fighting frozen water pipes and plowing 5-foot drifts of snow to feed their cattle,” Brown said. “But they’re here because they felt the call to serve.”

In terms of salary for legislators, Montana is in the bottom 10 among U.S. states. Montana legislators earn about \$80 a day. And aside from party leaders, legislators have no staff and no

offices — a far cry from the services provided to full-time legislators in states like Pennsylvania, California and New York.

“Because of the condensed and concentrated time frame, citizen legislators in Montana have a huge learning curve to understand the policies and procedures and to get their heads around the issues, which are as varied as the state of Montana,” said Hoffman, who served Madison County in the Montana House of Representatives from 1991 to 1993.

“It’s almost impossible for a single legislator to understand and read all the

Key legislative issues of interest to PPL, industry

Federal

- Climate change
- Multi-pollutant air legislation
- Transmission policy
- Renewable energy standards
- Nuclear loan guarantees
- Coal combustion products
- Taxes

Montana

- Climate change
 - (carbon sequestration)
- Hydro expansion as a renewable
- Water usage rate calculation

Pennsylvania

- Rate cap expiration, rate mitigation
- State budget issues
- Procurement of energy supply
- Renewable energy, climate change
- Energy efficiency, conservation
- Health care

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bills they'll vote on," he said, noting that of the 1,526 bills introduced in the 2007 legislative session, 604 of them were adopted.

And with the sense of urgency to get everything done in 90 days, "things can get raucous at times," said Hoffman, who has represented PPL Montana through four legislative sessions and finds a certain political honesty in the process.

"I've seen fist fights on the floor of the House over comments perceived to be personal. But the opponents soon met in the middle and apologized," he said. "It was all very straightforward."

This year, besides the key issues weighing on the minds of the Montana legislators, the House leadership suggested to the body that there's a need to uphold decorum through appropriate attire, a comment directed to several lawmakers wearing jeans at the Capitol. "That drew some grumbles," Hoffman said. "You see a lot of dress here that's less than business casual."

The Senate, however, strictly requires that gentlemen wear a coat and necktie and prohibits blue jeans for legislators, media, staff and others on the floor. "Only on the Saturday morning sessions does a measure of frivolity trump decorum, when a special award is announced for whoever wears the worst necktie of the day," Brown said.

On the edge of a vast wilderness area, this is Montana's capital city, where moose, black bear and mule deer are not unusual sights, and business districts, with names like Last Chance Gulch, conjure a rugged past. No establishment in town requires a coat and tie. For now, there's been no further talk on the House floor about establishing a dress code.

Legislators are expected to go back to their full-time jobs after their session adjourns April 25. ■

Meet, pass laws, go home — the Montana way since 1889

Montana has had a part-time Legislature ever since its admission into the Union in 1889. That year, under the state constitution, it met in a biennial session but for 60 days.

According to Jerry Calvert, a political science professor at Montana State University, that schedule stood for 83 years until voters changed the state constitution in 1972 so that the legislative session convened for 90 days.

Then in 1973 and 1974, for the first and last time in its history, the Legislature met in annual sessions not to exceed 60 days. But in 1974, another constitutional referendum narrowly passed, returning the Legislature to biennial sessions not to exceed 90 days.

"Legislators convene, pass legislation and go home," Calvert said. "They are only active again if they serve on one of the special interim committees or are called into special session by the governor. This is a small state. If you have a beef, you call up an administrative official in Helena, including the governor, directly, and you will get a reply."

In 1992, voters approved term limits for their legislators. They may serve no more than eight years in a single office in a 16-year period.

One senator is elected from each of 50 Montana Senate districts to serve a four-year term. Half of the Senate members are elected every two years.

House members are elected to two-year terms. Each one represents one of Montana's 100 House districts.

