
From Idea to Law

ACTIVITY AT A GLANCE...

Objectives: **Introduce students to the basics of the legislative process at both local and state levels**

Time: **30 minutes**

Space: **Any space available that fits youth comfortably; you will need to spread out around the room**

Materials: **Several sheets of paper and name tags or signs to differentiate the groups (you may want to provide students with handout SA-51 Legislative Flow Chart**

This activity is designed to help students examine the connections that exist between their lives and the government by examining the various roles governments play in providing services and establishing rules and regulations in our society.

Note: Not all cities function the same. Be sure to check out the process for your community. The “City Government” handout lists the three most common types.

Student Roles:

- Governor (or Mayor)
- Legislature – assembly or house and senate (or city council/county supervisors)
- Legislative committee
- Stakeholder/interest group role – lobbyists, concerned citizens, representative of business or community interests, etc.
- Bill Author/Sponsor – Individual who writes the proposed law and will advocate for its passage.

Instructions:

1. Discuss the sources of ideas for legislation – constituents, interest groups, sparked by a current event, from other lawmakers. Pick a Smart Growth policy to serve as a piece of legislation, write it down, and select a student to act as the lawmaker advocating for the bill. Select a relatively simple issue for which students can intuitively identify relevant stakeholders as well as arguments for and against. (You can pick the idea or have the group.) *Examples: Should the state fund a new freeway in a particular city? Should they require all new communities to have affordable housing in them?*
2. Assign each student in the room to the additional roles listed above. The legislature or city council can have as many members as you want. From this group, choose a small number to act as a committee to hear the bill. Create organization titles for each of the stakeholder/interest groups that are relevant to the legislation, for example Citizens for Walkable Communities, the Sierra Club, the Building Developers Association, etc.
3. Divide the students into groups based on their roles and send them to separate areas of the room.
4. Make the point that generally, a citizen cannot introduce legislation but must get her/his local, state or federal representative to introduce it to the city council, legislature, etc.
5. Have the legislation’s “author” introduce (read) the bill before the legislature or city council. Explain that the bill gets assigned to a committee to examine it in more detail.
6. Have the “author” take the bill to the students representing the committee members. Explain that the committee will conduct a public hearing on the bill. (At the city level public hearings are typically conducted for the full council and all members of the public are allowed to voice concerns to the city council.)
7. Bring in the stakeholder/interest group students to testify for/against the bill. Ensure that there are stakeholders representing both sides of the issues, and if necessary provide them with arguments for and against. Allow the students on the committee to ask questions and be involved in the discussion.
8. If committee members do not like aspects of the bill, explain that the committee can propose amendments (changes), each of which must be voted on before the overall bill can receive a vote. Have the students in the committee vote on the bill. If it receives a majority vote, then it will be sent to the full house of the legislature or to the city council.
9. After the bill is passed, walk the bill over to the legislature/council. Have the students debate a little bit regarding the pros and cons of the bill before they vote. If it looks like there will not be enough votes to pass the bill, they can either vote to send the bill back to committee for revisions, vote to amend it, or vote on the current version. If the bill does not receive a majority vote it will be “dead.”
10. For the sake of the activity, ensure that the bill passes. If you are using the state or federal level as an example, explain that the bill will have to repeat the same process in the second house of the legislature (Senate, Assembly, etc.). Explain that

a conference committee reconciles difference between the two versions of the bill and sends it back to each house for final passage.

11. Now send the bill to the governor (or mayor, if your city's mayor have veto power), for the final decision on whether to approve the bill. If the bill is vetoed (and if your role-play is on the state or federal level), you can send it back to the legislature to try for a 2/3rds majority vote to override the veto.

12. Review and Debrief. Using a flip chart sketch out the legislative process from idea to law, asking student to tell you what steps come next. You may also sketch the process for other levels of government (i.e., city, county, state). Talk about the specifics of the government process you may be working with in your project.