



A Citizen's Guide to Participation in the Wisconsin State Legislature

Prepared by the Wisconsin Legislative Council Staff, 2017

How to Find Legislative Documents and Follow the Legislative Process

The legislative process is complex and, to the outsider, can be something of a mystery. How does the citizen follow that process? How do you know what is happening on a particular topic? How do you follow the progress of a particular bill? How do you know when a public hearing will be held? The Legislature's Internet site has answers to these questions and much more information.

GETTING STARTED

THE LEGISLATURE'S HOME PAGE

There is more than one way to find most kinds of information regarding the Legislature. This guide presents some basic research tools and techniques using the Legislature's Home Page. As you use it, you will discover more tools, and develop your preferred research strategies.

The Home Page can be found at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov>. It is shown in the following figure. It will be referred to throughout this guide, though not all features of the Home Page will be described in detail.

The screenshot shows the Wisconsin State Legislature website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the text "WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE" and a search box. Below the navigation bar, there is a large photograph of the State Capitol building. To the right of the photograph are two search functions: "Find a Proposal" and "Find My Legislators". Above these search functions is a yellow box with links to "Citizens Guide to the Legislature", "How A Bill Becomes Law", and "The Budget Process". Below the search functions are three columns of links: "Law and Legislation", "Senate", and "Assembly". At the bottom of the page, there are five tabs: "Notification Service", "Committee Schedule", "Visit the Capitol", "Law and Legislation", and "More Searches".

WISCONSIN STATE LEGISLATURE

HOME SENATE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES SERVICE AGENCIES HELP

Search everything here Search

Citizens Guide to the Legislature
How A Bill Becomes Law
The Budget Process

Find a Proposal[?]

e.g. 'ABS' or 'mining' Find

Advanced Search

Find My Legislators[?]

Address Find

Use Location

FIND BY MAP

Law and Legislation

- Current Session
- Statutes
- Administrative Rules
- RSS Feeds

Session Information

- 2017-18 Session Calendar
- Session Statistics — Updated May 3, 2016

Senate

- Senators
- Committees
- Senate Session
- Senate Daily Floor Calendars

Citizen's Information

- Wisconsin Blue Book
- Citizen's Guide
- Report Fraud, Waste and Mismanagement

Assembly

- Representatives
- Committees
- Assembly Session
- Assembly Daily Floor Calendars

More Information

- Maps and Geographic Data
- Press Credentials
- Eye on Lobbying

Notification Service

Committee Schedule

Visit the Capitol

Law and Legislation

More Searches

WISCONSIN EYE

In the upper left portion of the Home Page is a photograph of the State Capitol. (You see a different photograph of the Capitol each time you visit the Home Page.) To the right of the photograph are two quick search functions, one titled **Find a Proposal** and one titled **Find My Legislators**. Above these is a colored box with links to information or documents of current interest in the Legislature. The rest of the Home Page consists of links to a wide range of information regarding Wisconsin law and legislation and the Wisconsin State Legislature. Take special note of the **Law and Legislation**, **More Searches**, and **Notification Service** tabs at the bottom of the page--they will be referred to frequently throughout this section.

In the banner at the top of the page is a general search function. This search function appears on most pages of the Legislature's Internet site, and allows you to search the content associated with that page. On the Home Page, the label on this search function says ***Search Everything Here***.

The More Searches and Law and Legislation Pages

If you click the ***More Searches*** button on the Home Page, you will see the page shown in the following figure. Below the six search boxes shown in the figure are instructions on how to use them.

The ***More Searches*** page will give you access to most of the information you are likely to need. However, for those wanting to do deeper research, click the ***Law and Legislation*** button at the bottom of the Home Page. The page that you will see is shown in the next figure.

Statutes

1. Statutes and Annotations
2. Statutes Index
3. Statute Sections Affected by Acts
4. Statute Cross-References
5. Repealed and Renumbered Statutes
6. Statutes and Other Law Archive
7. 1970 Annotations
8. Help and "About the Statutes"

Constitution

1. Annotated Wisconsin Constitution
2. Unannotated Wisconsin Constitution
3. Index to Wisconsin Constitution
4. Pending Constitutional Amendments
5. U.S. Constitution

Administrative Rules

1. Administrative Code
2. Administrative Register
3. Emergency Rules
4. Active Clearinghouse Rules
5. Rules Open for Comment
6. Rules with Hearings Pending
7. Final Clearinghouse Rules
8. Statements of Scope
9. Subject Index to Administrative Code
10. Subject Index to Clearinghouse Rules
11. Cross-References Contained in Code
12. Appellate Court Citations to Code
13. Administrative Rules Procedure Manual
14. Administrative Rules Notification Service

2017-18 Session

1. Senators and Representatives
2. Committees
3. Bill, Rule, and Appointment Histories
4. Text of Introduced Proposals
5. Amendment Text
6. Acts
7. Veto Messages
8. Enrolled Bills
9. Votes
10. Assembly and Senate Floor Calendars
11. Schedule of Committee Activities
12. Assembly and Senate Journals
13. Committee Records (ROCPs)
14. Legislative Rules
15. All Session-Related Documents

Bulletin of Proceedings Indices

1. Subject Index to Acts
2. Subject Index to Legislation
3. Subject Index to Journals
4. Author Index to Legislation
5. Subject Index to Clearinghouse Rules
6. Miscellaneous Budget Documents

Miscellaneous Documents

1. Executive Orders
2. Rulings of the Chair
3. Wisconsin Supreme Court Rules
4. Opinions of the Attorney General
5. Town Law Forms
6. Legislative Council Documents

Archives

1. Law
2. Districts
3. Session
4. Legislative Council
5. Drafting Files
6. Admin Code

Links

1. Help
2. Feeds
3. Preferences
4. Feedback
5. Notification Service

The **Law and Legislation** page has links to 65 separate sources of information, arranged in three columns. The left-hand column is dedicated to current law--the State Statutes and Constitution and the Administrative Code (the rules promulgated by executive branch agencies to implement the Statutes). The center column relates to the Legislature and legislation. (Much of the information about the Legislature is also available directly from the Home Page.) Among other information, the right-hand column has a group of links under the heading **Archives**; use these links to find information about legislation from prior sessions or the law as it existed in prior years.

USING THE HOME PAGE AND DOCUMENTS PAGE

There are multiple ways to find most any type of information on the Legislature's Internet site. The following describes some of the basic search functions. Explore these search functions and you will find that they are powerful tools to research many types of legislative documents.

HOW DO I USE THE GENERAL SEARCH FUNCTION?

You can use the general search function located in the upper right of each page to find information on specific topics. If you do your search from the Home Page, you will be searching all documents located on the Legislature's website, including, for example, reports written by the legislative service agencies, information about the Legislature and legislative

committees, and information posted on individual legislators' web pages, as well as the text of bills and amendments. What is more, this function searches materials for the current legislative session and the entire archive. If you do your search from another page, you will be searching only the documents associated with that page.

The general search function shows search results in two columns. The **Website Results** column is documents--reports and the like. The results in this column can be refined using the buttons to the left and the drop-down menu above (where the words "All Sites" appear). The **Legislative Publications** column is material such as bills, amendments, and the statutes. If you click on "**view more results**," at the bottom of that column, you will get a new page showing these results in greater detail. This page also has a column on the right with tools to limit the search.

To find information regarding renewable energy, for example, go to the Home Page, type "renewable energy" in the box, and click "Search." You will get approximately 100 website results. You can limit these results using the buttons to the left, or by using the box that says "All Sites." For example, click **All Sites** and select "Legislative Council" from this drop-down menu and then click the search button again. You will now see fewer results, all being documents on the Legislative Council's pages. To view a document, click on the title.

To see the bills and statutes this search found, click on **View more results** at the bottom of the **Legislative Publications** column. This shows more than 1,600 results for the search on "renewable energy." If you click **2015 Biennium**, the results are pared down by about 90%; if you further limit the search to **Text of Legislation**, for example, you find 10 bills and resolutions introduced in the 2015 Legislative Session that include the words "renewable" and "energy."

HOW DO I FIND THE STATUS AND TEXT OF A BILL?

The **Find a Proposal** search function on the Home Page is an easy-to-use tool to find the text and status of legislation, searching by key words or bill number. Simply fill in the form and click the "Submit" button or hit "Enter" on your keyboard. On the next screen you see, showing search results, click on the number of the bill you are interested in to get information about it. Similar searches for bills, acts, and statutes can be done from the **More Searches** page and from the **Law and Legislation** page.

These tools actually give you far more than just the text of a bill. If the bill was passed and signed by the Governor, you will find the number of the final, published act, as well as a link to a brief memorandum by the Legislative Council describing it (labeled "LC Act Memo"). If the bill was amended, you will get a link to the text of the amendments and the Legislative Council amendment memo. In addition, you will get links to fiscal estimates submitted by state agencies affected by the legislation, the record of committee proceedings, and information about lobbying on the bill, prepared by the Wisconsin Ethics Commission.

The database these tools use includes information for the current legislative biennium only, including the general session and any special sessions. A special session is identified by the month and year in which the Governor called the session, such as the October 2013 Special Session. Assembly Bill 2 from that session would be identified as 2013 OC3 Assembly Bill 2.

Information regarding earlier legislative biennia is available using links under the **Archives** heading on the **Law and Legislation** page.

Note that bills and laws contain many references to other laws. Following these references is essential to understanding what you are reading. [See the later chapter of this guide, titled *How to Read a Bill*.] In the documents found through this search function, most of the references are live links that will take you to the referenced provisions.

HOW DO I FIND A BILL IF I DON'T KNOW THE BILL NUMBER?

Use the general search function on the Home Page, described earlier, to find the number of a bill. Use search terms that either describe the subject or that you think are likely to be found in the bill. If you are not able to find the bill number this way, your legislator's office may be able to help you. If you do not know who your legislator is, use the **Find My Legislators** function on the Home Page to find out.

HOW DO I TRACK A BILL THROUGH THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS?


The Wisconsin State Legislature has a legislative notification service that allows anyone to track the progress of legislation and the activities of the Legislature and legislative committees. A user specifies what topics he or she wants to follow and the service notifies the user by email of developments related to the specified topics.

To activate this service, click on **Notification Service** on the Home Page. You will first need to create an account. Once you have an account, you must specify what you want to track. The service then provides daily email notices of key events affecting legislation you are tracking, such as the scheduling of a bill for a public hearing, an executive session (committee vote), or debate in the full house. The **Help** tab provides instructions in how to use the service.

The service offers four ways to track legislative activities:

- By **subject**. This option allows you to identify legislation by subject, based on key words, which you can then track.
- By **proposal** (bill number). This option allows you to track specific bills. There is a search box, used to designate the bills you are interested in. The bills you have selected are then listed in a second box. This list provides useful information about the bills, including the relating clause (bill subject) and links to the bill text and history.
- By **committee**. This option allows you to track the activity of specific committees. To add a committee to your list, click the down arrow at the end of the **Select Committee** line and select the committee from the drop-down list.
- By **author**. This option is under development. Once available, it will allow users to track all legislation introduced by selected legislators.

WHAT IS AN RSS FEED?

RSS feeds are another tool that allows you to track some, but not all, legislative activity. They are a particularly good way to track the progress of an individual bill. Look for the RSS symbol ---- on an Internet page displaying the bill text, bill history, or other information about the bill. Click on this symbol and then click on "Subscribe to this feed." Updated information on the subject of the feed you have selected will automatically be downloaded to your computer as it becomes available. To learn more about them, click on ***RSS Feeds*** on the Home Page, under the ***Law and Legislation*** heading.

HOW DO I FIND OUT ABOUT A PUBLIC HEARING ON A BILL?

The best way to find out about a public hearing on a bill is through the legislative notification service or RSS feeds, described earlier. However, hearings sometimes are scheduled with very little notice. As a backup, you can call the office of the chair of the committee that will hold the hearing and ask for the committee clerk. The clerk may be able to tell you when the chair intends to hold a hearing.

HOW DO I FIND INFORMATION ABOUT THE BUDGET BILL?

The budget bill is a massive document, many hundred pages in length, affecting all of state government and many other subjects. The best way to find information about it is to use the Internet site of the Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB), the agency that assists the Legislature through this process. In the banner at the top of the Home Page, click ***Service Agencies*** and then ***Legislative Fiscal Bureau***. The ***Publications*** tab on the LFB's home page gives a drop-down menu with various choices related to the budget bill and other topics.

HOW DO I FIND CURRENT LAW?

The easiest way to find a statute if you know the section number is to use the ***Go to a Statute*** search box on the ***More Searches*** page--just type the section number into the search box and click "Go." If you want to do a key-word search, the ***Law and Legislation*** page is the place to start. To search the Statutes, click on Statutes under the Law and Legislation heading, then click on Statutes and Annotations, enter your key words or a section number in the search box, and click "Search." Again using "renewable energy" for our example, you get 19 search results, organized by chapter. For example, in Chapter 196, Regulation of Public Utilities, there are 37 instances of the term "renewable energy," far more than in any other chapter. This lets you know that Chapter 196 is an important place to look for laws regarding renewable energy and related subjects. To search the Administrative Code, click on Administrative Rules under the Law and Legislation heading, then click on Administrative Code, enter your key words or section number in the Search box, and click Search.

The search results show only the sentence or phrase that contains the search terms. To see the whole statute in context, click on the section number. This will give you the text of the entire chapter, with your search terms highlighted. As with reading bills, be sure to follow cross-references in the text of the statutes, for a complete understanding of what you are reading.

HOW DO I OBSERVE THE LEGISLATURE IN SESSION?

There are at least three ways you can watch a session of the Legislature. First, on the Home Page, click ***Senate Session*** or ***Assembly Session***. On the left side of the screen that opens, you will find a calendar for the day's session. Along with this calendar are links to many documents related to the bills being considered--the bills themselves and any amendments, fiscal estimates, and reports and analyses relating to the bills. You may click these links to view these documents on the right side of the screen, or you may click a link at the top of the page to watch the session.

A second way to observe a legislative session is on WisconsinEye, a public affairs network that broadcasts all legislative sessions, many legislative committee meetings, and much more relating to state and local government in Wisconsin. You can watch WisconsinEye online at <http://www.wiseye.org/>. In addition, you may view it on channel 163 of the Time-Warner network or channel 995 of the Charter Communications network.

The third, and perhaps best, way to observe the Legislature is to come to the Capitol in Madison and sit in the gallery of the Senate or Assembly to watch the proceeding from close up.

WHAT ELSE CAN I LEARN FROM THE LEGISLATURE'S HOME PAGE?

The Legislature's Home Page is a source of much more information. By clicking on ***Senators*** or ***Representatives***, you get rosters of the two houses of the Legislature with biographies of the members and links to their individual web pages. Each member's home page typically describes the member's district and presents information of interest to that member's constituents.

Clicking on ***Committees*** gets you lists of the standing committees of the two houses and links to each committee's web page. A committee web page includes a roster of committee members and various information about the committee's work, including upcoming meetings and the status of bills referred to it. For similar information regarding joint committees and Legislative Council study committees, click ***Committees*** in the banner at the top of the Home Page and then click either ***Joint*** or ***Study***.

Other links on the Home Page provide a biennial session calendar, indicating when in a two-year session the Legislature is scheduled for committee work or floor sessions, daily floor calendars, and links to live video broadcasts of the Legislature in session. The ***Eye on Lobbying*** button links to the web site of the Wisconsin Ethics Commission and provides extensive information about lobbying in both the legislative and executive branches of Wisconsin government.

Click on any of these links to enter the database and then use the search function at the top of the page to search the database, using search terms that describe the subject you are interested in.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Five nonpartisan professional agencies support the Legislature, four of which produce a wide range of reports and documents. Their respective home pages can be reached through the **Service Agencies** tab in the banner at the top of the Legislature's Home Page.

- The **Legislative Council** prepares brief descriptions of all amendments adopted and all bills enacted into law, identified as amendment memos and act memos. It prepares a Legislator Briefing Book each session, which provides an overview of a wide range of subjects that come before the Legislature. It also produces informational memoranda on topics of current interest.
- The **Legislative Audit Bureau** (LAB) conducts audits of state agencies and state programs, and publishes its findings and recommendations in audit reports.
- The **Legislative Fiscal Bureau** (LFB), as already noted, prepares extensive materials regarding the state budget. In addition, it produces a series of informational papers every biennium which provide in-depth descriptions of state programs, with a particular emphasis on the fiscal aspect of the programs.
- The **Legislative Reference Bureau** (LRB) produces the Wisconsin Blue Book each biennium. This is a very detailed compendium of information about state and local government in Wisconsin, as well as other topics. (There is a link to an online version of the Blue Book on the Legislature's Home Page.) In addition, the LRB produces several series of publications on a variety of topics. The LRB also maintains a reference library relating to the Legislature at One East Main Street, in Madison.