



Tips on Surviving Your First Session

(from the past freshman Legislators who survived one!)

- 1** Come to orientation. Go to the mentor groups. Get to know as many people personally as possible during orientation -- including members of the opposite party and staff. Be open to the entire experience, enjoy meeting people. Get to know your House or Senate members.
- 2** Try to find common issues and values with both sides of the aisle. Try not to prejudice issues in committee or on the floor - keep an open mind and listen carefully.
- 3** Get lots of rest and a good night's sleep. Sounds simple, but you will find many demands on your time, all of which you will think you should do. Advice: do them all, but in moderation. Go, but leave early. No donuts, less beer, and proper rest! Be prepared to work 10-16 hour days.
- 4** Find time to exercise. Work out. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of your constituents. Work hard to stay healthy and avoid the "capitol crud".
- 5** Establish a seat mate relationship. Cultivate relationships with fellow Freshman. They are facing the same uncertainties/problems you are. You all will be here after we are gone. They will be your friends. Work on relationships on both sides of the aisles. Build relationships!
- 6** Don't let the first day get you down. Listen! Listen and watch the first three weeks. Learn your way around the building. Find a mentor you can trust, especially experienced legislators! Ask lots of questions. Learn how to manage your bills, papers, committees, and schedule. You will have to neglect some things. Find someone who can help you decide how to prioritize. You need a buddy system.
- 7** Be as familiar as possible with the State Constitution. Get familiar with the existing House or Senate and Joint rules that were in place during the last session and the new ones that will be presented. Learn the rules and insist they be followed. Rely on experienced members for protocol and rules, but think for yourself on the issues.
- 8** Preserve time for study. Be a good consumer of information and be prepared - don't assume someone else will get it right. Focus on the bills that come to your committees - listen - ask questions. Prepare for each day, e.g. read bills in advance, write journal notes during hearings, prepare lists of bills that will have exec action, anticipate floor action and be ready to speak.
- 9** Don't be afraid to talk to staff. Get to know Legislative staff as a resource as soon as possible. Legislative attorneys and researchers (and fiscal analysts) are there to help you; and they will make your life easier - use them. [Mentor groups were instituted so you would have a staff person that you know.] Seek out staff for advice. Don't hesitate to ask staff questions! Get involved in the process of your bills being written.
- 10** Wash hands at all times, you shake lots of hands and the cold and flu goes around. You cannot be effective if you are sick.

11 Get really good snow tires (studs are best) for those Helena hills. Outfit your feet with yaktrax to avoid slipping in the really icy parking lot and having to file a workers' comp claim -- safety first, freshman!

12 Answer constituent e-mail quickly in open moments.

13 Be respectful and polite to everyone - that includes members of your party (whether or not you agree with them), members of the other party (whether or not you disagree with them), Legislative staff, lobbyists, the public, and every single person who makes your life easier for 4 long months. Come to serve others, not yourself.

14 On the House or Senate Floor, conduct yourself in a manner as if your mom and dad (or your wife or husband or children) were watching. Listen more than talk. Listen, Listen, Listen, Talk!

15 Be a person of your word - Never lie - If you're not going to vote for something, say so.

16 Not all lobbyists are bad. Attend lobby functions when possible. Attend functions and meet all members from both parties on a social basis.

17 Not all bills sponsored by members of your party are good. Do not sign onto every bill that someone asks you to. They can come back to bite you. Understand what you are signing on to - it is embarrassing to vote against a bill you co-sponsored. Pay close attention to other people: their motives and agendas. Do not let them overshadow your principles.

18 Carry several bills (but no more than 10) so you get experience in front of several committees, but don't pick them up all up or introduce them all at the same time. Write the introductions of your first bills, keep it short and precise. Long intros kill bills. Carry just a handful of bills so you can really devote time to talking with stakeholders and other legislators -- especially if you are in the minority.

19 Don't shame, insult, brag, or crow over a bill's success or failure. It may cost you a vote you'll need later.

20 Laugh at yourself. A lot. But don't laugh at anyone else unless they are laughing also. Have fun. Take yourself seriously, but not TOO seriously.

21 When you make a mistake, admit it, rectify it (if possible), and move on. Do not harp on it and don't allow anyone else to, either. Take a deep breath and let mistakes roll off.

22 Remain positive.

23 If you have questions, ask. There is no stupid question. Ask lots of questions and pay attention to the process. Don't be nervous or scared. Ask for help/advice.

24 Watch videos of hearings in committee and on floor. Seeing them is believing - it helps prepare you for the actual events.

Contributions by Freshman Legislators from the 2007 through 2015 sessions.

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