

ROUNDHOUSE ROUNDUP

20 Tips for Roundhouse Rookies



- By Steve Terrell | The New Mexican
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Here are 20 things you'll need to know if you want to follow the state Legislature.

1) When you walk into the Roundhouse, you are on the second floor. The first floor actually is the basement. The House and Senate galleries, where the public can watch, are on the second floor. The House and Senate floors are downstairs. The third floor is where the committees meet. The fourth floor is where the governor's office and the Legislative Council Services are located. If you hear someone talk about the "fifth floor," that refers to Gov. Susana Martinez's political consultant, Jay McCleskey. But he's not really a floor. He's more of a state of mind.

2) Probably the easiest place to get lost is the third floor. One way to stay oriented is to remember that the large mixed-media buffalo head sculpture (you can't miss it) is to the north.

3) You can pick up a fresh copy of the House and Senate calendars and committee agendas every morning in the mailroom on the first floor or online at www.nmlegis.gov/Calendar/Session.

4) Don't trust House and Senate calendars. The speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader have the power to switch around the order as they see fit. And that's a power they exercise frequently.

5) The same goes for committee agendas. If a bill you're following is third on the agenda, you can't count on it to be heard after the second item. Sometimes a committee will hear a piece of legislation out of order as a courtesy to the sponsor, who might have to rush off to another hearing. But don't expect them to rearrange the agenda as a courtesy to you.

6) Many of the committee rooms are small. Some are downright claustrophobic. If you are following a high-profile bill, there's a good chance the committee room will fill up quickly, and you'll be left standing in the hall. Get there early so other people will be the ones in the hallway. (Sometimes, if a bill is expected to attract a huge crowd, the committee chairman will arrange to hold the meeting in the House or Senate chambers. But don't count on it.)

7) It's possible you might see people walking around the Roundhouse carrying guns, especially on days when gun laws are being discussed. Don't panic. Don't call security. It's legal to carry guns there. It was the subject of a lengthy debate last year, but the House eventually voted down, as a threat to liberty, a bill to prohibit guns in the Capitol.

8) It's still illegal to fire a gun during a committee hearing unless you have permission from the committee chairman.

9) As Archie Bunker would say, “Stifle yourself!” Don’t applaud, cheer or boo at committee meetings. Legislators, especially committee chairmen, hate that. If something makes you happy or sad, express yourself on Twitter.

10) If you’re testifying at a committee meeting, keep it short. Real short. Just state your name, your town, whatever group you might represent, whether you support or oppose the bill and maybe a sentence or two explaining why. Nobody wants to hear a long speech.

11) Contact lawmakers by calling the legislative switchboard: 505-986-4300. But don’t expect them to call you back during a session. Don’t even expect them to get back to you when you leave notes with their secretaries.

12) Here’s a pro tip from Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth: One of the best ways to buttonhole a lawmaker is to approach them at their desk in the House or Senate chamber before a floor session starts or right after it ends. However, you’ll have to leave when the session starts. Only legislators and staff can go on the House or Senate floor then. This rule is strictly enforced.

13) If you email a legislator, chances are high that the communication will stay private. That goes for private citizens as well as reporters, lobbyists and campaign contributors. The Legislature several years ago voted to exempt its emails from public records laws.

14) Know the numbers of the bills you are following. Some issues will be the subject of two or more separate bills. Knowing the bill number will help you follow it on the legislative website, www.nmlegis.gov.

15) If a committee “tables” a bill, that almost always means it’s dead.

16) Be sure to pick up a copy of the *2018 Legislative Almanac*, which is published by New Mexico Rural Cooperatives. It has photos of all the legislators, plus where they are from, party affiliation and how long they’ve been in the House or Senate. It also has committee lists, seating charts for the House and Senate floors, district maps and other good information. You can find these a few days after the session starts at a table by the east entrance and in a stand by the mail room.

17) The entrance to the Capitol parking garage is on Galisteo Street north of Paseo de Peralta. Some of the 580 spaces are reserved, but about 300 first-come, first-served spaces are available. It’s free and open late.

18) You are not allowed to park in the underground garage. And nearly all the spaces in the surface lot on the east side of the Roundhouse are reserved for staff.

19) For those who want to follow the session from the comfort of a home or office, the floor sessions and some committee meetings are streamed live over the internet at www.nmlegis.gov/webcast.

20) But if you do that, you’ll miss out on the great, cheap fast food in the snack bar, which is located near the west-side entrance.