

## Legislative Committees play Key Oversight Role, Regardless of Season

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**This week Sen. Vinehout writes about the ongoing work of legislative committees. Serving on committees provides legislators a key role in overseeing the activities of state government. Kathleen serves as several committees that meet even after the Legislature adjourns for the summer.**

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ALMA - “Will you be in Madison? I heard the Legislature went home,” the Buffalo County man asked. “I hope you are still watching over what’s happening down there.”

People want their elected officials to oversee state government. Lawmakers play a key state oversight role through their work on committees. There are several committees, upon which I serve, that oversee state activities. The work of these committees continues regardless of the season.

The Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) oversees all the functions of state government. Recently the LAB released its annual examination of the use of federal funds received by the state. As a member of the Joint Audit Committee, I’ll be meeting with auditors to discuss these findings.

The Audit Committee is also anticipating the second of three audits of the state’s economic development programs. Auditors are working to track money in grants, loans and tax credits given to businesses and communities to create jobs. I expect this audit to be released soon and the full committee to schedule a public hearing to examine the findings.

The Audit Committee looks back over the actions of state government and assesses whether or not programs met their purpose and money was properly spent. The Joint Administrative Rules Committee looks over new laws and assesses whether or not the agency writing the rules stayed true to the purpose of the law.

After a bill is signed into law, the agency responsible for the new law gets to work writing the administrative rules to implement the new law. A complex process of proposals, public hearings and approvals take place before the rules – which have the weight of law – go into effect.

Lawmakers who sit on the Administrative Rules Committee oversee that process for the people of the state. My colleagues and I meet regularly to hear about agencies' progress writing the rules. We approve or send rules back for revision.

Rules for hunting and trapping in state parks, grants for training workers, unemployed workers and GED – high school completion – are currently up for consideration in this committee.

Citizens' use of the Capitol as a public space is also under consideration. Capitol police arrested individuals for singing without a permit in the Capitol Rotunda. Singers appealed the arrests which made their way through the courts.

A judge temporarily stopped the state from enforcing the rule. The judge wrote "the Capitol rotunda is closer to an out-of-doors, traditional public forum...pre-permitting schemes which limit speech in public places must serve more than just scheduling and administrative functions." Several federal courts struck down requirements that small groups obtain permits. Wisconsin's restrictions were so severe in the past few years that, at one time, groups larger than 4 needed to have a permit.

State officials rewrote rules about the use of the Capitol. But free speech advocates said the state's actions chilled free speech.

Now the Administrative Rules Committee must sort things out.

Some committees provide oversight on special functions of state government. An example is the Joint Committee on Information Policy and Technology. Over the years Wisconsin wasted millions in poorly planned computer systems. The Audit Committee documented many of these mistakes but it is up to the Information Policy and Technology Committee to provide prospective oversight – going forward – of work on new computer systems.

Other committees play a key role in the functioning of state government. One example is the committee addressing the relationship between the state and our 11 tribal nations.

Tribes are sovereign nations and each tribe has its own constitution and government. The relationship between the tribes and the state is complex and rests on treaties, federal and state laws and court rulings. For years I've served on the State Tribal Relations Committee and currently serve as Vice Chair. This committee, like all I've mentioned, meets throughout the year to work on resolving tribal concerns.

So, this summer you will see me at parades, chicken dinners, fairs and festivals. But I will also be in Madison for committee work. Lawmakers must not forget their role as overseers of state activities.

People want to know elected leaders are watching over what's happening in state government, regardless of the season.

Tags: Untagged