

TRACKING
THE
LEGISLATURE

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Once upon a time the people in a village got together because they were having trouble with alcohol and drugs. They talked over many ideas about how to solve these problems. They all agreed to help.

One problem they saw was with the laws. The people wanted some of the old laws changed and new laws made. They wanted to be sure they knew what the laws said. They wanted the lawmakers to hear their ideas.

Somebody said, "What we need is somebody to go to Juneau and keep track of the Legislature." "I will do it!" said Daniel. "I will go and track the legislature!"

The people were surprised. Daniel was the best hunter and trapper in the village. He had never been interested in lawmaking before. But, they thought, it is true that Daniel can track down ANYTHING; maybe he is just the person to send.

Daniel arrived in Juneau. He wasn't too sure where to go so he began by visiting the Juneau **Legislative Information Office**.

Juneau Legislative Information Office
129 6th St Rm 111
Juneau, AK 99801

They had all kinds of useful information. There were booklets that told all about the lawmakers (**legislators**). They had a Directory of State Officials. There were other booklets, too.

Daniel told the people why he had come to Juneau. They suggested that he go and talk to the legislators who represent him. They gave him the name of his Representative and his Senator and explained where their offices were.

Daniel first went to his Representative's office. He was lucky because he was able to get in to talk to his Representative right away. Sometimes you have to get an appointment ahead of time. He told his Representative about the concerns of his village; the Representative listened carefully. He told Daniel he didn't think they could solve all the problems but he did think one of their ideas would make a good law.

"What we need to do is draft a bill," said the Representative. "A **bill** is a proposed law."

"HMMMMMM," thought Daniel, "a bill. That can mean many different things. I wonder why these people who like to talk so much use the same word for so many different meanings?"

A bill must be **sponsored** (presented by) a Representative or Senator. In a couple of days Daniel and his Representative met with some people in the Division of Legal Services to '**draft**' (write up) their bill.

He found out that their idea for a law had to be checked out to make sure that there was not already a law like the one they wanted. They also had to make sure that their new idea for a law was in agreement with the laws of the

state and federal constitution. They had to figure out if using their law would cost the state money. The **'bill'** (or new idea for a law) had to be written in legal language.

"Tracking this legislature is going to be harder than I thought. It even starts out in a puzzling way."

While Daniel was waiting for his bill to be drafted he decided to find out more about the legislature. He learned that there are twenty Senators and forty Representatives. Senators are elected for four years and the Representatives for two years.

An important issue in representation is called **reapportionment**. The Alaska State Constitution requires every 10 years, when the census is taken, the legislature to change or reapportion so the residents are equitably represented based on population.

In 2000, Alaska had a population of 626,932. When this is divided by 40, it comes out to about 15,673 people for each Representative and 31,346 for each Senator. Representation is based on number of people not on the size of an area. So a very large area can have one Representative and a very small area can have several Representatives. Each person is represented by both a Senator and a Representative. They act as the 'voice of the people' and make the laws the people want.

The state has to be divided up into areas that contain as close to 15,673 persons as possible. These areas are called **'districts'**. The people that are represented are called **'constituents'**.

In Alaska, most of the people live in cities so most of the Representatives come from cities. To make sure that interests in the villages are not overlooked, the Senators and Representatives in the rural districts got together and formed a group called the **'bush caucus'** (caucus means a group that gets together to agree on policy). The bush caucus often votes together as a **bloc** (group).

Finally the day came when the bill was ready. His Representative had taken the bill to the Chief Clerk of the House. It was put on the daily order of business and assigned a number. At last it was to be **'introduced'** (read to the entire House of Representatives).

Daniel went to the House of Representatives to listen. The clerk read the number of the bill, his Representative's name, and the title of the bill. The presiding officer then announced what committees would hear the bill. They went through the same thing with several other bills. This is called a **'first reading'**.

Daniel felt proud but a little puzzled. People were walking in and out. Some of the Representatives were talking to each other. Nobody seemed to be listening. "How can they make good laws if they don't even listen?"

Later that day, Daniel stopped by his Representative's office to get a copy of their bill. He found out that copies are also sent to members of the Legislature, members of the assigned committee(s), state agencies, made available to the public through the Documents room in the Capitol Building, the Legislative Information Offices, and the text of bill and any action on the bill is put in the computer system.

The Representative's aide was there. (An **aide** works for the legislator gathering data, attending meetings and other duties as assigned.) "Well, Daniel, how did you like the legislature?"

Daniel did not know what to say. He did not want to be rude. The aide smiled. She knew what Daniel was thinking because she had felt the same way when she had first visited the legislature. "Nobody seems to be paying attention, do they?," said the aide. Daniel nodded.

"I guess that is because the first reading of a bill is just a first step, a formality. In the old days all the Representatives had to listen to each bill so they could decide how to vote. Now there are too many bills for the Representatives to understand them all. That is what the committees are for. The committees read each bill and listen to people tell them the good and bad things about a bill. Then the committee decides if the bill should be made into a law or not. The rest of the Representatives usually vote in agreement with whatever the committee says."

"Now I understand why my Representative was so concerned about the committee assignment," thought Daniel.

"In your Alaska State Legislature Directory booklet there is a list of all the committees and who is on them. It also tells the type of bills the committee considers."

"How do the legislators get assigned to committees?" asked Daniel. He had decided (quite correctly) that there are things that happen at the legislature you could not figure out by just watching, even if you watched for YEARS.

"That is an interesting question, Daniel," said the aide. "The committee assignments are usually made by the leadership of the majority party. The **majority party** is the party that MOST of the legislators belong to. Members of the majority party get together to choose a leader. Sometimes several different legislators in the majority party want to be the leader. They will offer other legislators the chairmanship of committees in exchange for support."

"It is kind of like the walrus fighting for a place on the beach. The most powerful bulls get their choice. The rest have to take what is left or wait until they become powerful," quipped Daniel.

"Ha, ha, ha! You have a way of understanding things clearly," said the aide.

After the first committee assignment for their bill, Daniel was eager for the hearing. He kept checking with the Legislative Information Office, but no hearing was scheduled. Finally, he checked with his Representative.

"They are just sitting on your bill," the Representative said. "What a strange thing for them to do," thought Daniel. "But several other things I've seen here have seemed a little strange." Daniel wondered if he would ever get used to Juneau.

The Representative then went on to explain the many different things a committee could do with the bill. The committee could:

- Add things to the bill - amendments
- Combine bills that deal with the same subject
- Ignore the bill - this is sometimes called 'sitting on a bill'
- Hear the bill and give it a do pass, pass as amended, no recommendation or do not pass ruling

The Representative also began to explain some of the complicated 'trading' that he was doing to get a hearing for the bill. Daniel listened politely. He was glad that his Representative knew how to get things done in the legislature. It was a lot like the village. You had to know the right people for certain things and be sure they were on your

side. If everybody wanted something it was easy. If nobody wanted something, it did not get done. If half the people wanted something and the other half did not, then there was a dispute. Each side always tried their hardest to win but, in the end, usually both sides had to give in a little to come to an agreement.

"Good news, Daniel!" said the Representative. "The committee has agreed to hear our bill. Why don't you come in to my office and we'll review your testimony?"

Daniel was pleased but a little worried. The Representative gave him some tips on how to testify effectively:

- Talk only about the bill the committee is hearing. Do not get off the subject.
- Have facts to support what you are saying. Do not just base your testimony on emotional reaction. Instead of "I really love this bill", say "This bill will help villagers because..."
- Be brief. The committee has to hear a lot of testimony. They usually do not like it if one person talks too long.
- Be prepared for questions. Answer any question as best you can, but don't be afraid to say "I don't know" if you do not know the answer.
- If it makes you feel more comfortable, write down what you wish to say and read it. Try not to speak too quickly or too softly.
- SMILE! Don't be afraid. The people on the committee are your Representatives. They work for you and all the people of Alaska. They need to hear from you. They want to hear from you.

Daniel went to where the committee hearing was being held. You can find out about the committee hearings from the committee staff, the Legislative Information Office or from your legislator's office.

When his turn came, Daniel went to the microphone. He told them who he was and where he had come from. He told what the problem was in his village and why the people felt the bill could help solve it. A committee member asked him a question and he answered it. He really could not tell how any of them felt, but they were polite and listened. It was over quickly and he felt relieved.

One of the people who testified on the bill had a briefcase filled with information. Daniel wondered how this man had time to look up so many things. He found out the man was a registered lobbyist. A **lobbyist** is someone who is hired by an interested group to influence legislators to vote the way that the group wants.

After the hearing, the first committee **amended** (changed) the bill and gave it a 'Do Pass' ruling. The report from the first committee was read before the House floor session during the Reports of Standing Committees on the Daily Calendar.

The bill went to the second committee of referral. This committee decided not to hold hearings. The second committee report was also read before the House during the reports of standing committees.

Next, the bill went to the Rules Committee, which decides when a bill will be put on the daily calendar to be voted on by all the Representatives in the House. In ANY of these committees, a bill can be held up and not passed on to the next step. If this happens, a bill 'dies' in committee.

"It is like watching a salmon swim up river and wondering if it will make it," thought Daniel.

The Rules Committee finally put the bill on the Daily Calendar for the second reading. There were no amendments from the floor. The bill was then **engrossed** (put in its final form) and was advanced to the third reading on the same day. A three-quarters majority vote can advance a bill from second to third reading on the same day. The bill was passed by a majority vote.

Daniel was glad. He went to his Representative's office. He was surprised to find his Senator there, too.

"Our bill passed." "Yes," said the Representative, "But now the bill has to go through this same process in the Senate. A bill must be passed by both the House and the Senate."

"You mean ALL THIS OVER AGAIN?!" Daniel could not believe this could be so. "I will be a very old man with many grandchildren before this bill becomes a law!"

"If you had come to my office first," said the Senator, "this bill might have started in the Senate instead of the House. A bill can begin in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. As it is, I have sponsored a similar bill in the Senate, but we are expecting some opposition. Would you be willing to go back to the village and get us more people who will say that they want this bill to become a law?"

"Yes, I will do this", agreed Daniel. "Tell me the things I can do back in the village to get this bill passed." Together they worked on a plan.

Daniel began as soon as he got back. He met with the people in his village. He told them about the bill and what it would mean to the village. He told them what had happened in the Legislature and why there were going to be people who were against the bill. He asked them if they would help him get the bill passed.

The people thought about what Daniel said. They knew he was a truthful man. They knew that he cared about what happened to the people in the village.

The health aide spoke up. "Since this bill is about drugs and alcohol and concerns the health of people, we could make a resolution and send it to the Regional Health Corporation. If we can get support from the region, villages throughout the district will hear about this bill."

"Tomorrow I am going to a meeting of representatives of our Regional Non-profit Corporation," said one of the other villagers. "If we could get their support, it would help too."

A visitor who was a relative of Daniel's had been listening. "In our village, members of our church would be interested in passing this bill."

One of the elders spoke, "We should each explain this to the members of our families and tell them to tell others."

Everybody nodded and smiled. "We will use our 'Mukluk Telegraph'."

The Senator's staff in Juneau was keeping Daniel posted about the progress of his bill. He also found out about what was happening with his bill by calling his nearest Legislative Information Office. He told the villagers that they could call their LIO also. (There is a list of the Legislative Information Offices in the back of this booklet.)

The Senator had explained that it was Very Important that the legislators get letters of support for the bill before the committee votes on the bill.

Daniel and his helpers found that it was hard to get people to write letters even when they felt strongly about the bill. They worked out a system that helped them in their village.

- Ask people who know you and trust you to write letters. Explain why the letter is important and how this law, if passed, will affect their lives.
- Have some short sample letters available:

(Name of your village)
Date
Dear Senator(or Representative)_____,
I am in favor of (Bill No.). It would help our village because it would (tell how it would help).
Please vote for passing it.
Sincerely, (your name)

- If there are people who would like to tell their legislator what they think but cannot speak English, try to find someone that can translate for them and write a letter.
- Ask people who are willing to write if they will ask other members of their family to write too.
- Attend meetings and see if you can discuss your bill there and have letter writing supplies available so people can write letters right at the meeting when the issue is fresh in their mind.

Another effective way to communicate with Legislators from the village was sending a **Public Opinion Message** from the nearest Legislative Information Office. This service is available at no cost to the public. Daniel and his friends from the nearby villages sent as many as they could. Here is how they did it.

- Think out what you want to say.
- Write it down in 50 words or less.
- Go to or telephone your nearest Legislative Information Office and tell them who you want to send this message to, and give them your name, address and telephone number.
- Give them the message and they will send it to your legislator.

Example:

To Senator _____:

Please support bill (number). It will help our village by (tell how).

They learned that you can send messages AGAINST bills, too.

Because of the interest by rural people in this bill, the Senate committee chairman decided to hold part of the hearing over the **Legislative Teleconference Network**. Daniel made a request to the committee chairman to

have their village telephone plugged into the network so people could testify without leaving the village. Several other villages made this request too. The committee chairman agreed.

Daniel went over all the things he had learned testifying before the House committee in Juneau (page 7). Sometimes teleconference hearings have a limited time for each person who wants to testify so it is very important to know exactly what you want to say. Daniel helped others who wanted to testify by sharing what he knew.

Daniel made sure that the local radio station announced when the hearing was to be held so people in the villages could plan ahead to testify. He also put up notices in the village store, the post office and the council meeting room.

When the time came to testify, everybody was a little nervous. They realized that what they were going to say would be heard by people from all over the state. They also were proud that they were taking part in trying to make a better law for all of Alaska. There was some testimony against the bill, but there was a lot of support for it from other villages nearby. Everybody smiled when they recognized the name of someone they knew. One of the committee members mentioned all the letters he had received from the villages.

They waited to hear what had been decided. Days went by without any word from Juneau about the bill. Finally a call came for Daniel.

"Good news," said his Representative. "Our bill just got out of committee with a 'Do Pass' and will be voted on tomorrow. It looks like we have the votes to pass it." "Does this mean that it is now a law?" asked Daniel cautiously.

He had heard of a thing called 'Murphy's Law' that seemed to be written about trying to get a bill passed.

"Well, if a bill passes both houses, the only thing that can really snag it up is a **veto** (NO) from the governor. In that case, it would take a 2/3 majority in both the House of Representatives and Senate to make the bill become a law. This won't happen with our bill because we have heard from the governor's staff that if the bill passes he will sign it. Would you be able to come to Juneau for that?" "I will try," said Daniel.

It happened just like the Representative said it would.

Daniel went to Juneau to see his bill signed into law. They met in the governor's office. There was his Representative, his Senator and some other important people. They watched the Governor sign the bill. Everybody smiled and shook hands. Somebody took pictures.

"Daniel," said the Governor, "I understand that you and other village people did a great deal to help get this bill passed. It is good when people get involved with making laws that are important to them. I hope you will continue to help."

Daniel thought for a moment. "This kind of lawmaking is good. It gives people a chance to say what kind of laws they want and who they will elect to speak for them. Many things are talked about and settled before a law is made. Even those of us who are far away in a village can tell our ideas. But...., for me, it is easier to track a fox than to keep track of things here at the legislature."

"I know just what you mean," said the Governor. "I often feel the same way."

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