

GOP lawmakers propose transparency rules

BY DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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SANTA FE – Republicans in the state House are asking the chamber's Democratic leadership for a series of rule changes aimed at making it easier for the public to track how their representatives vote.

The GOP proposals include providing more advance notice of what bills will be considered during House floor sessions and lifting a 2019 rule change that allowed for the fast-tracking of some legislation.

The Republican caucus is also proposing that the chamber release a public tally of how each member voted when a bill is tabled in a committee meeting, a procedure commonly used to reject legislation.

The proposals come as Republicans remain heavily outnumbered in both of New Mexico's legislative chambers and Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham occupies the Governor's Office.

Taken together, the proposed rule changes would increase transparency in the House and slow the pace of some legislation – a critical consideration in the state's fast-moving 30- and 60-day legislative sessions. A bill dies upon adjournment of a session, unless it has passed both chambers.

But moving a little slower wouldn't hurt, Republicans say, especially if it makes it easier for people to follow the action.

"I don't think we ever should move so fast that our constituents don't have the ability to monitor and participate," House Minority Leader James Townsend, R-Artesia, said in an interview Thursday.

The rule changes are outlined in a letter sent Tuesday to House Speaker Brian Egolf, D-Santa Fe.

In a written statement Thursday, Egolf said that some of the ideas are interesting but that he hasn't committed to making changes.

"I have taken an initial look at the letter and some of the ideas are interesting," Egolf said. "I look forward to visiting with Leader Townsend in the coming weeks

and will provide further comment after we have had a chance to discuss the ideas.”

Control of the House has flipped back and forth over the past few years, and both parties have taken some steps to make it easier to follow legislative action. In 2015, for example, the Republican majority put committee hearings on a more predictable schedule, making it more convenient for people who want to speak about a bill during public comment.

Democrats kept those changes in place when they reclaimed the majority two years later. The House in recent years has also moved to make proposed amendments easier to understand and find online and to make “emergency” legislation – sometimes called dummy bills – available to the public more quickly, among other changes.

This week’s transparency letter was signed by Townsend, House Republican Whip Rod Montoya of Farmington and House Republican Caucus Chairwoman Candy Spence Ezzell of Roswell.

The proposed changes include:

- Requiring committees to note in the official record how each member votes when a bill is tabled. Tabling a proposal keeps it from advancing forward to the next committee or the chamber floor, and it’s a common motion used by opponents to ensure a bill can’t proceed.

Unlike formal committee recommendations, votes to table aren’t reported in the official record and posted online. It can be difficult to track down the outcome, unless you’re in the audience as the vote happens or watch the archived video.

- Lengthening how long a bill must remain in the queue to be heard by the full House. A previous rule required legislation to sit on the speaker’s table for a full calendar day before final passage, the GOP lawmakers said, but it was changed last session to 24 hours, allowing for faster consideration of legislation.

The change was primarily aimed at the “rocket docket” – a set of bills with broad bipartisan support – but House Republicans say the accelerated docket was a one-time idea that’s no longer needed.

- Releasing a list of bills scheduled for debate and action by the House at least 24 hours in advance. Now, the House publishes a daily list of bills ready for final action, but the chamber skips around on the agenda, depending on which bill sponsors are present in the chamber and other factors. Some bills are never called up at all.

Speaker Egolf often announces at the beginning of the day which bills he expects the House to take up that afternoon or evening, although the list is subject to change.

Changing House rules generally requires approval by a majority of House members.