

It's busy time for bill drafters

By TERESA CHEBUHAR
Times Staff Reporter

OLYMPIA — If you ever catch yourself or someone else saying, "There ought to be a law," go ahead and write one.

"Bill drafting is just good, logical writing. There is no magic to it, just certain guidelines," said Richard O. White, code reviser in the Legislature's Bill Drafting Section.

White and eight other attorneys spend much of their time composing and revising bills to be introduced in the Legislature.

Sometimes the proposed bill "is just a gleam in the legislator's eye and it's like baking a cake from scratch," White said.

BILL DRAFTING takes from minutes to a week. White or another drafter may interview the person who would like a bill written.

"I have seen bills go through here in 20 minutes," but it normally takes longer than that, he declared.

Any of the bill drafters can write bills on any number of subjects. They are generalists who "tend to become specialists." Among the drafters are specialists in education and taxation.

A lawyer-client confidential relationship is maintained through drafting even though the drafters may receive several similar bill requests. In one session, White said, 15 bills were drafted when "bombings were a hot item."

This session many bills deal with education, pensions and energy.

THOUGH BILL drafters get their ideas and work direction from the legislators, "we do not try to interject our opinions in the policy," White said.

Anyone can write a bill and propose that his representative introduce it. Of course, the bill has to be constitutional, White pointed out. At times, the Bill Drafting Section sends proposed legislation to the attorney general for an opinion as to its constitutionality before proceeding with the legislative process.

"We do not write bills in a vacuum," White added.



Richard O. White

"We tailor them to existing laws."

After a bill has been written in the Bill Drafting Section it is sent back to the legislator, who may want to change it.

"No number of changes makes us grumpy," White said.

The bill drafters use com-

puters to review present laws which would be affected by the proposed law. Such a review is necessary to ensure continuity in the laws.

DURING THE 43rd legislative session the bill drafters logged 6,103 documents;

2,931 were bills introduced during the session.

"We are drafting bills all year long," White said. But legislators "procrastinate. But legislators 'procastinate like anyone else,'" so White and his staff were working feverishly Sunday preparing bills for the opening of the special session Monday.

Not all the bills being considered in this session are new and some need updating to reflect action taken last spring. As committees meet to discuss and hear testimony on proposed bills, amendments may be added. Those too, are sent to the Bill Drafting Section.

COMPUTERS DON'T write the bills yet, but they can print out points of a bill which are being considered for change in the Legislature. They even produce an "exception report" if a word is misspelled.

"We have come a long way from the seven carbon copies of bills we used to produce; that's seven erasures for each mistake," White said.

Asked if he worries about technical errors which could produce a monster bill by simply transposing a word, White smiled, rapped on his desk and replied, "It hasn't happened yet."

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