

## Shining the Rail in Springfield

By Jim Nowlan

A five-foot-high brass rail protects lobbyists and lawmakers from falling into an abyss called the Illinois State Capitol rotunda. Each morning the state legislature is in session, the “lobsters” (lobbyists) often gather in threes and fours at the third-floor rail to share gossip and information about the day ahead. “Is (Sen. Jacqueline) Collins really going to call Senate Bill 3950?” “No, she’s going to hold it.” “Good deal. Time to work the committee members some more.”

“Are we really getting out of here May 7?” “Think so, (Speaker Mike) Madigan has scheduled his fundraiser for April this year.”

Above, looms the majestic dome, with its striking gold and green patterns, shards of sunlight streaking through vertical windows high in the dome.

Information is king in the legislative process. Ten thousand bills, a record, have been introduced by this the second year of the biennial session. That’s more than 50 bills per each of the 177 members of the House and Senate.

Just about every member of the Democratic Party majorities in the House and Senate is chair of a committee, which brings extra pay. This means scores of committees where any of the thousands of bills can be heard and voted upon. One hour’s public notice is all that is needed to hear a bill.

Resting one’s suited sleeves on the rail (“shining the rail”) is a key stop throughout the day in the game of trying to keep on top of the where a bill is and when

will it be heard, let alone what's in it. With hundreds of bills still alive this spring session, information is king, and trust is the king's consort.

As the legislator lacks time to absorb all that is in a complicated bill, the lobbyist presents his or her succinct summary of the bill. The lawmaker also relies on the degree of trust that has developed in the lobbyist over the years. Votes are often cast more on trust than on detailed knowledge of the bills.

This day, for example, the Senate Environmental Affairs Committee is holding a quick meeting in Room 400 of the Capitol to hear a bill that would prohibit the use of bisphenol a (BPA) in the production of reusable baby bottles and jars.

In the long rectangular room, senators sit around an oak-paneled horseshoe that surrounds and looks down on the small witness table. Floor to ceiling, wizened murals of Grant and Lincoln face the 100 or so who can fit in the room.

Committee chair Sen. Susan Garrett (D-Lake Forest) gavels to order the eight senators present. She reads the witness slips for 16 or so proponents of the bill and a similar number of representatives of opposing groups.

Young idealistic lobbyists for the Environmental Law and Policy Center and like-minded groups are seated among older, more experienced lobbyists for the Chemical Society of America and the Illinois Manufacturers' Association.

From the witness table, bill sponsor Senator Dan Kotowski (D-Park Ridge) explains that he has been working on the legislation for years, and that he continues to work with the opposition to find common ground. He then introduces an environmental policy specialist who declares that BPA has been shown to cause neural and muscular problems, obesity and all manner of terrifying afflictions in humans.

Brevity is the key in testimony. Lawmakers are generally under pressure to reach other committees, where they might be sponsoring bills. Three-four minutes is an eternity for one person's testimony. After that, you lose the lawmakers and irritate the chair, who have many other fish to fry that day.

After the proponents, the opposition brings up a distinguished looking older man, a PhD chemist who represents the Chemical Society of America. He declares that, "based on the weight of the scientific evidence, BPA is not a risk to human health." Again, brevity is key. The scientist is admonished to conclude his testimony, as the committee members seem to know what they want to do.

Whom to believe? See why trust is so important!

The senators ask questions and make statements. Sen. Dale Risinger (R-Peoria) harrumphs that the bill would drive container manufacturers out of the state. He asks that the bill be held in committee for more hearings.

As often happens in committees, several fellow Democrats express appreciation for Kotowski's bill, yet observe that it needs more work, as well as greater efforts to see if common ground can be found with the opponents.

Sen. Garrett then says she will vote to move the bill on to the Senate floor, with the understanding that the bill is "still a work in progress." In the majority, the Democratic members out-vote the Republicans, and the bill moves forward.

The committee adjourns, and the Senate Revenue Committee members take over the gilded room. The environmental lobbyists scatter to other committees or maybe back to the rail to talk next steps. Now come the green eye-shade lobbyists to joust over tax matters.

The committee comes to order. Several from the previous session on BPA are also on this committee, which tackles property tax caps, the waiver of those caps for mental health, and assessment multipliers in districts smaller than townships. The mind spins with the range of topics discussed in less than an hour's time.

Nearing the end of the day, some lobbyists and lawmakers are back at the rail, checking times for their dinner out together. After dinner, all will gather at Floyd's Bar for the Sullivan Party, an annual St. Patrick's Day bash hosted by the 10 lawmakers and lobbyists named Sullivan. Great opportunities to compare notes, gossip and lobby members in a convivial setting.

By party's end, it will be just a few hours until gathering the next morning to shine the rail in preparation for the day's sparring and legislating.