

Ohio House changes operating rules, igniting transparency concerns

By Anna Staver
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Changes to how the Ohio House operates will either make lawmaking more efficient or less transparent, depending on who you ask.

Republicans, who control the chamber with a massive supermajority, passed sweeping changes to its operating rules Wednesday--rolling back several changes [Democrats brokered](#) last general assembly.

"I don't think this has anything to do with Republicans working with Democrats," said House Minority Leader Allison Russo, an Upper Arlington Democrat. "This is my concern: We're seeing further and further movement from Republicans in not being accountable to the people."

One of the biggest changes eliminated a rule requiring 24 hours notice before a bill gets a floor vote.

"That notice is not just for us but for the public. To know what the people's House is doing," said state Rep. Dani Isaacsohn, a Cincinnati Democrat. "That is what breathes life into the freedom of expression...It breeds transparency. All of us want to know what's coming up on the floor with 24 hours notice."

The Ohio Senate doesn't operate with 24 hour notices and its former-president-turned-speaker thinks the House will be just fine without it.

"If you have to set the calendar 24 hours in advance, a lot happens when everybody shows up to town," said Speaker Matt Huffman, a Lima Republican. "You lose another week potentially of getting something done."

By nixing the 24-hour rule, bills coming out of committees on Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday mornings can be voted on that week rather than waiting for the next session.

Huffman told reporters he kept Senate Minority leadership in the loop about what was coming and plans to do the same in the House.

Amendments (changes) to legislation also won't need 24 notice before a committee debate them.

"It takes away accountability for what we are doing here," Russo said. "Making sure the public have ample notice about what is happening in committees and on the floor. We think that is not good."

In 2022, Democrats negotiated with then-House Speaker Jason Stephens, a Lawrence County Republican, for several rules concessions. They were able to do that because Democrats helped Stephens win the speaker's gavel despite minority support among his own caucus. Huffman, however, was chosen as speaker without Democratic votes.

The new rules also return more power over Democratic staff and committee assignments to the speaker.

Democrats offered several amendments that Republicans rejected, with Republicans arguing repeatedly that their new rules were actually a return to the way the House operated in previous sessions.

They also are a reflection of how the chamber already operates.

"During lame duck, we had to waive that same rule in committee in order to have our Christmas tree bills get out of committee," said state Rep. Josh Williams, a Republican from Sylvania Township. Williams was referring to the legislative blitz at the end of the two-year session, where lawmakers often load up legislation with unrelated amendments to push them over the finish line.

The House also is implementing new restrictions on access to the lobby outside the House chamber. The area will now be closed to everyone except those with floor privileges (members, staff, credentialed media) for 30 minutes before and after session.

The public can still go upstairs and sit down in the House gallery before session starts.

Huffman told reporters the change was partially about security and partly about getting session started on time. Republicans at different levels of state government have received [threatening letters laced with white powders](#) in recent months.

“There’s one story I had about a lobbyist blocking a door demanding to know how they were going to vote,” Huffman said.