

The ALA Policy Process - An Introduction for New Councilors

Most new Councilors know very little about the ALA policy process and their part in it. In fact, because the policy process is not spelled out anywhere, even experienced Councilors, Association Officers, and other active members would be hard pressed to describe it. This document is written to help fill that gap.

Council is ALA's policy-making body. Nothing becomes policy of the overall Association unless Council approves it. But Council does not write policy. Instead, Council acts on proposals that are submitted to it.

The main sources for ALA policy proposals are (1) Committees that routinely report to Council, such as the Committee on Legislation, the Budget Analysis and Review Committee (BARC), and Membership Committee; (2) Individual councilors acting independently or at the behest of individual members, or of bodies that do not otherwise have an entrée to Council; (3) Resolutions passed by Membership meetings. In all three of these cases, the policy proposals come to Council already written.

Council is unable to act on mere suggestions that a policy on such-and-such a matter is needed, other than to refer such suggestions to the appropriate body or individual for preparation of a policy proposal that may later be presented to Council.

Once a policy proposal is moved on the floor of Council, Council may take any of the following actions:

- Debate
- Amend
- Refer
- Postpone
- Defeat
- Pass

Proposals that come to Council from Committees are usually complete and well-written, since they have had the benefit of the review process in the committee, as well as possibly assistance from headquarters staff.

Proposals that are brought to Council from individuals do not go through the same review process, and as a consequence, they may not be as polished as those that come from committees. For this reason, individual Councilors who wish to bring resolutions to Council would be well advised to announce their intention to present a proposal on the Council list; to post draft versions on the Council list, asking for comment; and to take a draft of the proposal to a Council Forum for discussion. Through these means, problems can be identified, improvements can be made, and information can be gained about other interested bodies that may need to consider the proposal before it can be brought to a vote.

Proposals passed by Membership meetings come to Council as is. They may or may not have undergone any prior consultation or review by interested parties, and may or may not be well written.

Council may or may not actually debate a proposal. The better written the proposal, and the more self-evident the need, the less likely there is to be much debate. As a result of issues brought up in debate, Council may decide to refer the proposal for additional work or information before taking further action. There are two types of referral:

- The proposal may be referred to other interested bodies for comment. Proposals with fiscal implications must be seen by BARC, and if this has not been done, the proposal is almost certain to be referred to them. Other proposals may be referred to existing committees, boards, etc. whose work is related to the substance of the proposal, but who may not yet have seen it.
- If a proposal needs a lot of work - (e.g. if it is hard to read, confusing, or incomplete, or if it brings up questions that need to be answered, or if more information is needed) - Council may refer the proposal back to the author to clear up the problems.

Referral is not rejection. If a motion is very unlikely to pass regardless of how well written, thoroughly researched and vetted it may be, Council will usually simply defeat the motion rather than referring it to anyone.

Postponement is similar to referral. If there are problems with wording, comprehensibility, background, consultation, etc., Council may move to postpone further action until those matters are dealt with. Just as in the case of referral, postponement is not rejection.

If a proposal is passed, it becomes the concern of the Policy Monitoring Committee (PMC). PMC is a committee of Council, and it has a limited charge. PMC does not write policy, look for the need for new policy, or interpret policy, and it is not a watchdog charged with assuring the policy is being followed. Instead, PMC's primary responsibility is the upkeep of

the Policy Manual. PMC takes the policies passed by Council, determines where and how to include them in the Policy Manual, and brings each disposition to Council at the next Annual Conference or Midwinter Meeting as an action item.

PMC reports are generally nondramatic, as they deal with insertion of policies already approved, or incorporation of approved revisions. Nevertheless, because not all Councilors were present when the items in the PMC report were passed, some Councilors may question the wisdom, intent, or wording of the policies being added to the Manual. When that happens, the PMC Chair will remind the body that the policy has already been passed by Council, and that the substance of the policy is not subject to debate at that time.

In addition to dealing with the incorporation of policy changes and additions already approved by Council, other policy-related issues may come to PMC's attention in the course of its other work, or through questions directed by members. Many of these matters can be dealt with without a vote, and are brought to Council's attention for information only. Such matters may include editorial or housekeeping issues such as grammar, numbering, typographical errors, etc. PMC may also discover obsolete policies, inconsistent terminology, or other matters of a more substantive nature, in which case it will bring them to Council for a vote.