COBELL DAY · NOVEMBER 5, 2026

Your Voice in Helena

A student guide to the 2027 Montana Legislature

At a glance

- January 4, 2027: The 70th legislative session convenes at noon in Helena.
- 90: Maximum number of legislative days to pass bills.
- About two minutes: A common amount of time available for public testimony. Individual committees set their own limits.

Why we made this

You do not need to be a lawyer, a lobbyist, or a political science major to be heard in Helena. Most of us had never set foot in the Capitol before our first hearing. It turns out the process is more open than it looks from the outside.

Elouise Cobell and accountability

Elouise Cobell was a Blackfeet banker who spent more than 13 years making the federal government account for money it held in trust for Native people. She did not start out as an activist. She started out asking questions nobody wanted to answer. In 1996, she sued the federal government on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Native people whose trust accounts had been mismanaged for more than a century. The case settled in 2009 for $3.4 billion, which funded payments to account holders, a program to return fractionated land to Tribal Nations, and a scholarship for Native students. She passed away in 2011, but her questions still shape how governments answer to Native people. This guide is about learning to ask those questions in Helena.

This guide is nonpartisan. It explains how to take part, not what to support. When you testify or write to legislators, you speak for yourself, not for the University.

How a bill moves

The original guide depicts the following seven steps in a flowchart. They are presented in reading order here.

1. Drafted. A legislator requests a bill, and staff draft it.
2. Introduced. It gets a number (HB or SB) and goes to a committee.
3. Committee hearing. Supporters testify, then opponents, then members ask questions. You can speak at this stage.

4. Committee vote. The committee passes it, amends it, or tables it.
5. Floor votes. The full House or Senate debates and votes.
6. Other chamber. The same steps occur again, including a second public hearing. You can speak at this stage, too.
7. Governor. Signs it, vetoes it, or lets it become law without a signature.

The committee hearing is your moment. A bill that passes one chamber will get a second hearing in the other, so you often get two chances to speak.

Find your legislators and follow bills

Every Montanan has one state senator and one state representative. Who is yours?

- Find your district. Use the district lookup at leg.mt.gov. Registered to vote in Missoula? Use your Missoula address. Registered at home? Those legislators are yours too.
- Search bills. The Legislature's bill system lets you search by number, keyword, or sponsor and sign up for updates.
- Use Capitol Tracker. Montana Free Press publishes a tracker of bills, lawmakers and votes each session.
- Follow student reporters. UM's Legislative News Service sends journalism students to cover the Capitol every session.
- Watch. Hearings stream live and are recorded on the Legislature's website.

Five ways to be heard

Take part from Helena, from your dorm, or from your phone. In-person testimony can be especially impactful, but other formats also allow participation. Effort levels below are estimates from the original guide.

Testify in person

Go to the hearing in Helena and add your name to the sign-up sheet when you arrive.

Estimated effort: Highest

Testify remotely

Register on the Legislature's Public Participation portal and testify by Zoom.

Estimated effort: Medium

Written comment

Submit comments or documents on a bill to a committee through the same portal.

Estimated effort: Low

Short message

Send up to 1,000 characters to a whole committee or up to five legislators.

Estimated effort: Lowest

Phone message

Call (406) 444-4800 and leave a message for a legislator.

Estimated effort: Lowest

Your two-minute testimony

Plan on about two minutes. Each committee sets its own limits, depending on how many people want to speak. Use this simple structure.

8. Introduce yourself. “Chair [name] and members of the committee, my name is ___, and [I’m a student at the University of Montana/a concerned parent/active public land user/etc.] from ___.”
9. Name the bill and your position. Say the bill number and whether you support or oppose it.
10. Tell them why. Use your own experience. Your story is the evidence nobody else can give.
11. Make one clear ask. Say what you want the committee to do, then thank them for their time.

Tips from people who’ve done it

- You don’t have to be an expert. Legislators hear from experts all day. They hear from students far less often.
- Write it out and time it. Two minutes goes fast. Practice out loud at least once.
- Leave a written copy. Hand it in or upload it, so your words stay in the record even if time runs short.
- Sign up early to testify remotely. In 2025, the deadline was two hours before the hearing, and each Zoom link worked for one person and one meeting. Check the 2027 rules.
- Test your tech. Check Zoom, your microphone and your connection before the hearing starts.
- Speak for yourself. Not for UM, a club or a Tribe, unless you’ve been asked to represent them.

Tribal Nations and the Legislature

Montana is home to eight federally recognized Tribal Nations, and many bills each session touch Tribal lands, children, health, education and resources. Elouise Cobell’s case was about

what happens when a government makes decisions about Native people without asking them or answering to them. That question still comes up in Helena.

When you follow a bill, ask:

- Does this bill affect Tribal citizens, Tribal lands or Tribal governments?
- Were Tribal Nations consulted before it was written?
- Who testified, and whose voices are missing from the hearing?

Tribal governments speak for themselves, government to government. As a student, you can still show up, listen and share how a bill would affect you, your family or your community.

Where to learn more

Montana Legislature: Participate

Official portal for testimony, comments and messages

Montana Budget & Policy Center

Remote testimony checklist and video

ACLU of Montana

Engaging in the Legislative Process: a step-by-step guide

Montana Free Press Capitol Tracker

Bills, lawmakers and votes in plain language

Montana Women Vote

“How to Show Up for the Legislature” trainings

Session rules can change. Check leg.mt.gov once the 2027 session begins.

Prepared for Cobell Day by the American Indian Governance and Policy Institute, University of Montana.