

House adopts new rules

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The House has adopted new rules for floor debate, including a controversial change to the way that legislators can offer amendments to bills.

In a 69-59 vote early Tuesday morning, the House approved new Permanent Rules, which guide bill movement and floor debate. The vote followed a contentious, 9.5-hour debate, much of which centered on a new requirement that amendments be filed the day before a bill goes to the floor for debate.

It's a potentially major change to the daily rhythm of the House, where amendments have often been proposed and argued at a moment's notice. DFLers who proposed the new deadline say it will make the legislative process more transparent and deliberative, and help avert errors made when lawmakers vote on amendments without having a chance to study their impact.

"Too often, we've made mistakes as a result of doing amendments late in the night and on the fly, without preparation," said House Majority Leader Erin Murphy (DFL-St. Paul). The prefiling requirement will also give the public more time to read and react to amendments, she said.

Republicans called the change a power grab by the DFL. They argued that the amendment filing deadline will stifle members and reduce the value of floor debate, and worried that they could be enforced inconsistently by the majority party.

"We make bills better through floor amendments, and sometimes the need for those amendments is not anticipated until the floor debate," said Rep. Dean Urdahl (R-Grove City). "...Restricting and silencing members is not openness."

The new deadline for filing amendments has some exceptions, including a provision that waives the requirement when lawmakers don't have a certain amount of advance notice that a bill is slated for floor debate.

a bill needs to be amended after reaching the House Floor, it can be returned to committee by a majority vote under the new rules.

Legislators tweaked the proposed rules several times before approving them. Among the amendments approved:

- An amendment must have a time stamp showing when it was drafted to help determine whether it was turned in on time.
- The prefiling window will reopen if bills are slated for floor debate and then pushed back to a later date.

An earlier version of the proposed rules would also have allowed the Speaker of the House to send bills back to committee without a vote, but legislators changed that language last week to require a vote if even a single member objects to a bill returning to committee.