

BRENNAN  
CENTER  
FOR JUSTICE

Brennan Center for Justice  
*at New York University School of Law*

161 Avenue of the Americas  
12th Floor  
New York, New York 10013  
212.998.6730 Fax 212.995.4550  
www.brennancenter.org

January 12, 2011

**RE: Recommendations for Assembly Rules Reform**

Dear Assembly Member:

This is a follow up to a December 10, 2010 letter from good government groups concerning recommendations for rules reforms in the Assembly. We read with great interest a recent article from *City Hall News* discussing the work already underway in the State Senate for reviewing and reforming that chamber's operating rules in the new session. We are hopeful that similar progress is being made in the Assembly.

There is growing consensus in Albany that our state is at a turning point, and fundamental change is needed. There is no reason why the Assembly should not take the lead in this reform effort, beginning with its own operating rules. Enacting new rules for the chamber that contain meaningful reform would be an important early signal to all New Yorkers that the new Assembly is up to the challenge of changing the way things are done in Albany.

As was noted in the letter from good government groups, your colleagues in the Senate passed several notable rules reforms during the last session, which we encourage you to review and consider adopting rules that will go further in:

1. Making the distribution of member resources more equitable by distributing funding for members using standard formulas, publicly provided in the operating rules;
2. Allowing members to force committee hearings on specific bills, giving power to rank and file members to hold public hearings on legislation over the objection of leadership;
3. Enabling members to bring bills with sufficient support to the floor for a vote, allowing popular bills that lack the support of leadership to survive past committee; and
4. Making the legislature's proceedings completely public, and recording and reporting attendance, votes, minutes, and debates, allowing citizens to obtain records without the expense and delay of a Freedom of Information Law request.

In addition to the reforms the Senate has undertaken, we reiterate our call for the Assembly to take initiative on the following rules changes:

1. Consolidate legislative committees and further reduce the number of committees on which an individual member may serve during a legislative session;
2. Require committee reports issued with any bill voted out of committee to set forth the purpose of the bill, the proposed changes to existing law, section-by-section analysis, the bill's procedural history, committee or subcommittee votes, any individual members' comments on the bill, and organizations which support and oppose the bill;
3. Require a process for reading, debating and amending any bill before it receives a vote from the committee (absent a vote by the committee to forego that process for any particular bill);
4. Strengthen the ability of committee chairs to control the committee budget and make hiring and firing decisions; and
5. Institutionalize conference committees, so that when bills addressing the same subject have been passed by both chambers, a conference committee will be convened at the request of the prime sponsor from each chamber or the Speaker and Majority Leader.

We are anxious to work with you in the coming days to pass these reforms that will help make the Assembly a more open, democratic, and accountable chamber. The public's desire for reform in Albany is clear. An overhaul of the rules of the Assembly would be an important signal to New Yorkers that their elected officials are listening.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawrence Norden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "L".

Lawrence Norden, Senior Counsel  
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law