

Curb your inquiries? Debate over time limits for bill-related questions flares up in Senate

[By Dan Boyd / Journal Capitol Bureau](#)

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SANTA FE — The legislative session is less than two weeks old, but tensions are already rising over senators' ability to ask as many questions as they want.

Several Republican senators took to the chamber floor Thursday to complain about Democratic committee chairs setting time limits on member questions during hearings.

“It is not right that members of the state Senate, who are elected by their constituents, are not allowed to dig down into those bills,” said Senate Minority Leader William Sharer, R-Farmington.

“There are problems with some of these bills that need to be brought out in the open and discussed,” added Sen. Candy Spence Ezzell, R-Roswell.

The issue flared up after a lengthy Senate Conservation Committee meeting earlier in the day on water-related legislation.

In addition, Sen. Katy Duhigg, D-Albuquerque, this week limited members of the Senate Rules Committee to five minutes of questioning apiece during debate on a bill dealing with overhauling the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish.

Duhigg said Friday procedural rules give committee chairs the authority to run their panels efficiently.

“Sometimes that’s going to include ... controlling the time that folks can speak,” Duhigg said.

In response to Republicans’ concerns, Senate Majority Leader Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, also cautioned that having no limits on questioning could, if taken to the extreme, lead to unchecked filibusters.

“Let’s just pause for a moment before we get so outraged,” Wirth said during Friday’s discussion on the Senate floor.

Senate rules do not directly stipulate whether time limits on questioning can be imposed in committee hearings, though they do require that a senator refrain from interrupting another senator while they are speaking.

The rules also allow senators to move to close debate after two hours of discussion, though that rule only applies to floor debates and has been rarely invoked in recent years.

Disputes over procedure and perceived time-wasting have been more common in the House of Representatives, where minority Republicans have, at times, sought to slow the pace of legislation by engaging in lengthy debates.

During one House committee hearing this week, Rep. Liz Thomson, D-Albuquerque, accused GOP lawmakers of engaging in repetitive questioning, saying she was “embarrassed” by the tactics.

That prompted a sharp response from Rep. Stefani Lord, R-Sandia Park, who took umbrage at what she described as inaccurate insinuations.