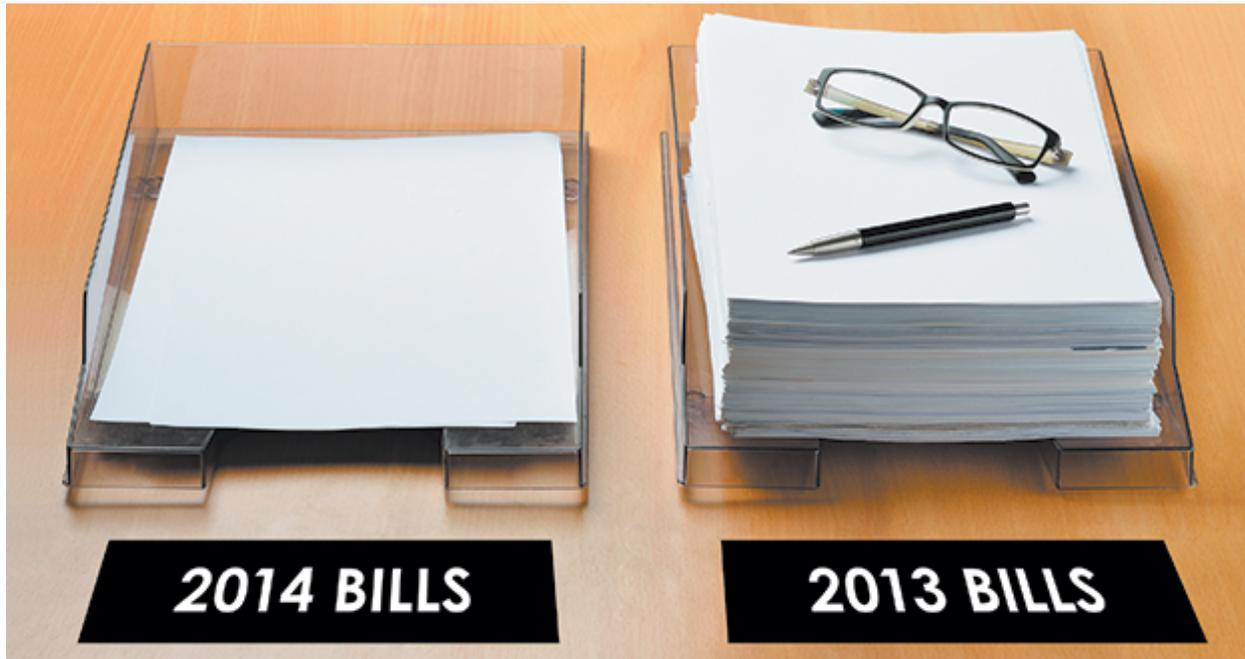


Bills trickle in as lawmakers assess effects of last year's bitter session

By: [Ben Giles](#) January 12, 2014



If the number of bills that have been pre-filed in advance of Arizona's 2014 legislative session are any indication, lawmakers won't have much to do at the Copper Dome this year.

As of Jan. 9, just 73 bills had been filed. It's a dramatically lower figure than in previous years, as lawmakers head into the second regular session of the 51st Legislature.

Two years ago — leading into the second regular session of the 50th Legislature — lawmakers pre-filed 147 bills before opening day. And four years ago, in advance of the 2010 session, lawmakers pre-filed 136 bills.

Lawmakers and lobbyists aren't shocked by the figures. Activity at the Capitol leading up to the opening of session has been lower than normal, said Senate Majority Leader John McComish, R-Phoenix. "There haven't been as many lobbyists making appointments with me to talk about the bills that are all teed up and ready to go," McComish said.

Lobbyists agree that pre-session activity has been quieter than normal, and though theories on why there's been so little buzz at the Capitol differ slightly, almost all reasons can be traced back to the 2013 legislative session, which left some lawmakers bloodied and bruised by the vicious fight over Medicaid expansion and the special session called by Gov. Jan Brewer to drive her foremost legislative

priority through an unwilling Republican majority in each chamber.

Some of those wounds have healed, but to what extent remains to be seen. For some, the bitterness remains.

"You can't swing a dead cat without hitting someone with hurt feelings at the Capitol," said lobbyist Gibson McKay.

Anger has calmed

Sen. Don Shooter, R-Yuma, said he's done his best to help everyone be friendly once again and get along.

Some of the anger that remains has "calmed down a little bit, it isn't quite as flagrant as it once was," Shooter said. But he's not optimistic about anyone's ability to get bills passed in either chamber. It's as if lawmakers were walking on eggshells at the Capitol, cautious not to be the one who disturbs an angered senator or representative eager to lash out as a way to settle a score from the Medicaid expansion debate.

Shooter said he's hopeful the Senate can maintain some dignity, and he has tried to help repair relationships among key Republican leaders in the chamber. Shooter invited Senate President Andy Biggs, as well as McComish and Assistant Majority Leader Adam Driggs, R-Phoenix, to join him at campaign fundraisers.

The relationship between Biggs, R-Gilbert, who helped lead an unsuccessful fight against Brewer and the Medicaid expansion proposal, and McComish, who broke ranks and helped organize Democrats and a handful of Republicans to defeat the GOP majority, could be crucial to the Senate's recovery.

Even while playing the role of peacekeeper, Shooter said he's pessimistic about his own bills' chances of passing either chamber. Shooter's concerned that lawmakers will cast votes, or withhold votes, as payback, though Biggs insisted that lawmakers will avoid the pettiness of casting votes in that manner.

"Regardless of how that last session ended, we'll react professionally," Biggs said. "If a bill comes up and they think it's good policy, they're going to support that bill, and if they think it's bad policy, they'll vote against it."

A hangover effect

Biggs attributed the lack of bills filed so far to a hangover effect from the 2013 session. It's a reluctance, perhaps, to return to work at a place lawmakers left last summer with some ill will.

"What happened last year was emotionally drenching, and I think that there's some fatigue," said lobbyist Barry Aarons.

Aarons said he did have one legislator ask him, point blank, "Do you think I'm going to be punished for Medicaid, and my answer was I don't know."

Lawmakers are left wondering how much political capital they have left to use and maneuver their bills in such a way to pass the muster of votes in committees and in each chamber.

"Everyone's measuring their political yardstick and is trying to measure how much political capital is left in their bank," McKay said.

Concerns over the safe passage of bills have given lawmakers and lobbyists extra pause in considering what kind of legislation to propose this year. Aarons said he's been more strategic in looking for lawmakers to sponsor legislation he'd like to push.

Aarons said he has been talking to Republican committee chairman about a couple of bills. He said the chairmen voted against Medicaid expansion and are "relatively mainstream conservatives."

Committee chairs make for promising sponsors since it's considered a shoo-in that legislation they sponsor would clear their own committee. The alternative, Aarons said, is to find a committee chair who's at least willing to hear an issue, then a sponsor on that chair's committee.

It's not a groundbreaking strategy, but Aarons said lobbyists have been extra cautious in using it to choose who will guide their bills through the Legislature.

A common purpose

McComish acknowledges that there must be some residual ill will, but that in his opinion, "I think it's overblown. I believe that we have common purpose... if you want to get

along with your fellow members, you can't just say I'm never going to vote for any of your bills."

Others have pointed to the 2014 election year, when many freshman lawmakers will be defending their seats for the first time, as a reason for the lack of bills. Election years typically throw the number of bills sponsored at the Capitol into a tailspin, McKay said.

It could be a quiet year if lawmakers simply focus on the budget and head to the campaign trail earlier.

"I think there is a general kind of unwritten sense among everybody that they'd really like to take care of the meat and potatoes that's absolutely necessary and go home," Aarons said.

There are also signs that 2014 could be business as usual at the Capitol, as Sen. Steve Gallardo, D-Phoenix, suggests. Lawmakers have simply fallen behind schedule, as the session "kind of snuck up on folks," he said.

Gallardo has roughly a dozen bills on his desk, nearly ready to file, and another 30 bills or so being worked on by legislative counsel, he said. And other lawmakers may be similarly busy behind the scenes — 1,139 bill folders have been opened in the House and Senate, according to legislative staff.

A folder could indicate legislation is in the process of being written, or it could simply mean a lawmaker had an idea for a bill but hasn't worked much at all to make it a reality. Still, the sheer number suggests that while only 73 bills have been pre-filed to date, many more are on the way.