



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 23, 2009

Weapons Banned at NH State House

A "civil discourse" requires the disarming of citizens when they enter the State House, according to the President of the New Hampshire Senate. Senate President Sylvia Larsen (D-Concord) defended a new rule, adopted on Monday by the committee charged with oversight of legislative facilities, that bans firearms and other weapons from the State House and two other state buildings.



"We are not recommending and have no intent to put in metal detectors," Larsen told the New Hampshire *Union Leader*, "but we do want to see a return to civility where civil discourse occurs in this building." Guns at the State House became a concern last year when a number of armed individuals stood and shouted at lawmakers from the House gallery during debate and votes on state's rights issues, the Manchester paper reported.

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The rule adopted by the Facilities Committee stipulates that no one but a law-enforcement officer may "carry a firearm or other dangerous or deadly weapon or an explosive, open or concealed," in the State House, the Legislative Office Building and the nearby Upham Walker House. The ban also applies to the underground tunnel connecting the State House and the LOB. Armed law-enforcement officers must produce "sufficient identification" if security staff requests it. The 8-3 vote went along party lines, with Democrats supporting the rule and Republicans opposing it.

The new rule has sparked a debate within as well as outside the State House, with the Democratic leaders of the House and Senate defending the measure and Republicans criticizing the committee action. Democrats have been in the majority in both houses of the Legislature in the traditionally Republican state since the 2006 elections, but Larsen said a no-weapons policy was in place at the capitol for a decade under Republican rule before it was scrapped by the Republican leadership in 2006. The reason given at the time for rescinding the rule was that it did not adequately define the "State House complex" to which the ban applied.

Recalling the disruptive conduct of citizens bearing guns in the House gallery, Larsen said: "Many House members felt they'd be more secure if we had the policy back in place."

"For many years deadly weapons were not allowed in the State House," Speaker of the House Terie Norelli (D-Portsmouth) said, in a statement issued in defense of Monday's action. "As elected leaders, we have a responsibility to protect citizens who come to witness the democratic process first hand."



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But at least one legislator has argued the new policy endangers the safety of the lawmakers themselves, by limiting their ability to defend themselves when traveling to and from the State House. Senator Sharon Carson (R-Londonderry) said the ban on "dangerous or deadly weapons" would apply to such dangerous devices as pepper spray and mace. "Many of us are here late at night after security has gone home," she said. "It sounds like now we will not be able to have anything to protect ourselves."

The vote left in place a rule that says a person can leave the buildings rather than submit to a security screening. But Senate Minority Leader Peter Bragdon (R-Milford) noted that there is no provision for storage of a weapon on site. It is unclear, he said, what a House or Senate member is supposed to do if he or she arrives at the State House with a weapon. He also objected to the way the rule was passed. It was brought up Monday morning with no notice, he said.

Rushing things like this through at the last minute, whether they are a good idea or not, leads to mistakes," he said. "This is really an issue of transparency, which Democrats said they would take seriously." By the end of the day gun owners around the state had already been calling the State House to complain about the rule, Bragdon said.

Cornerstone Policy Research, a New Hampshire group promoting constitutional and pro-family policies, was quick to respond, issuing an e-mail denouncing the rule as an attack on the Second Amendment. The group urged New Hampshire citizens to call the Senate President's and Speaker's office to demand a repeal. The New Hampshire Liberty Alliance has scheduled an "Open Carry" protest rally outside the State House for 2:30 EST this (Wednesday) afternoon.

Along with the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, New Hampshire residents can cite Article 2-A of the Bill of Rights of the New Hampshire Constitution: "All persons have the right to keep and bear arms in defense of themselves, their family, their property and the state." The amendment does not mention any place or places where the right does not apply.

The *Union Leader* report of the new rule has generated a large number of highly spirited comments on the newspaper's website from people both within and outside New Hampshire. "Makes you wonder if bin Laden won," one reader commented. Another pointed out that Virginia Tech was a gun free zone when 32 people were killed there in a rampage by a lone gunman in April of 2007.

"I know a number of state legislators who choose to be armed at the State House and Legislative Office Building," wrote Sam Cohen of Barrington, New Hampshire. "Like non-legislators in the pro-gun community, they will either fight this outrageous regulation or disregard it."

Photo: State House in New Hampshire



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