http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisconsin-protest-250.jpg 

***Good people can make a difference to bills moving swiftly through the legislature, like AB 554 where overwhelming constituent contact in legislative offices stopped action on a GOP proposal to allow an out-of-state corporation to buy and operate public water utilities. Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the speed with which bills are moving through the Legislature and how people's action has made a difference.***

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MADISON - "What can we, as ordinary citizens, do to keep the legislature and the governor from passing/signing house bill 554? It scares the heck out of me," wrote Claudia from Eau Claire.

"I know that Kathleen will vote against this terrible bill, but no doubt against the odds," Sarah wrote from Eau Claire.

The "terrible" bill was AB 554, a bill that would allow out-of-state private corporations to buy public water and sewer utilities. The bill would eliminate a required public referendum to approve the sale.

There is good news for all the folks who wrote asking me to oppose the bill.

Recently the Senate was set to vote on final passage of the bill. However, when time came for the vote, Majority Leader Fitzgerald asked that Assembly Bill 554 be returned to committee – a way to stop the bill.

He later told WisPolitics news service the bill was, "not going anywhere."

Assembly Bill 554 caused many people to contact elected representatives. My office received 41 calls or letters in just two days. People also attended town hall meetings and researched what their legislators said about the issue.

“What was very telling about this privatization of public services is the New Jersey law passed just a few days ago,” wrote Telford from western Wisconsin. He attended a town hall meeting held by his senator and heard comments supporting the bill. He looked up the bill and found not only had the bill just passed in New Jersey but, in his words, “In the article are the same pro talking points my Senator used in the…listening session.”

WisPolitics described the efforts to get votes for the bill: “Senate Republicans had been working on an amendment to get members comfortable with the bill, but couldn’t reach a consensus.”

Good for Telford and everyone else who paid attention. You made a difference.

Speed and secrecy have plagued the Capitol in the last few months. Bills just introduced are rushed to committee hearings. Complete re-write of bills – called substitute amendments – are introduced just before a public hearing and those who came to testify wondered if their concern was addressed or not. Substitute amendments introduced just before a vote left lawmakers with no time to study the new bill before voting. An Assembly higher education committee voted on bills that had no public hearing. Some bills were voted out of committee just minutes after they had their first public hearing. Some Assembly bills voted on by the full Senate did not have a Senate committee vote.

In one day, 30 committees held public hearings. At least 254 bills passed the full Senate and/or the Assembly in just three days. To put this perspective, only 127 bills were enacted into law during the previous 13 months of this current two-year Legislative Session.

These bills needed public scrutiny. Some took away local powers – like the bill that would not allow counties to issue identification cards. Another took away local powers to protect tenants or set up historic districts. Bills eliminated natural resource protections including many changes to water and shoreland rules. Another repealed the state’s moratorium on new nuclear power plants. Some bills were aimed at elections, such as taking away special registration deputies and new on-line voter registration.

It’s no wonder people worry there is nothing they can do to slow things down. But there is – and people are acting in ways that make a real difference.

Recently two protests brought many first timers to the Capitol. A few weeks ago, Native American Wisconsinites protested the digging up of Native burial grounds. Shortly after the protest, the Assembly Speaker announced he had no plans to move the bill.

More recently, 20,000 Latinos and supporters descended on the Capitol opposing an anti-immigrant bill passed by the Assembly and the bill taking away counties’ ability to issue ID cards. The second bill is headed to the governor. But the first bill faces an uncertain future in the Senate.

So, whatever you do – write, call, attend a town hall, research a bill and tell the world – do it. In the words of Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”