Ever wonder how the approximately 300 NFPA codes and standards are developed? They are written and revised not by NFPA staff, but by volunteers using a consensus process. All NFPA codes and standards are developed and periodically reviewed by approximately 7,000 volunteer committee members with a wide range of professional expertise. The public is also an important player in the standards-making process.

All NFPA documents are written by consensus based on an ANSI-approved process. The revision is a two-stage process that takes approximately 2 years to complete. All NFPA codes are revised every 3 to 5 years. Strict regulations are in place to develop NFPA standards to ensure that all points of view are considered and that the process is fair and open. A committee of approximately 30 members from 9 different classifications, including special experts, enforcers, manufacturers and document users, meet to determine what revisions may be required to maintain safety and to keep up with ever-changing technology.

NFPA membership is not required to participate on an NFPA technical committee, and appointment is based on factors, such as technical expertise, professional standing, commitment to public safety and the ability to bring to the table the point of view of a category of interested people or groups. Each technical committee is established so that a balance of interests is maintained, with no more than one third of any committee from the same interest category.

When a standard is up for revision, it is posted on NFPA’s website and is open for public input. Anyone, not just committee members, can suggest changes, additions or deletions to the document by visiting the document’s information page on the NFPA, opening the Next Edition tab and clicking on the particular section of the standard where the revision is needed. They then make the recommended change and provide a statement and substantiation for that change.

The committee considers all public input at its first draft meeting. All public inputs will receive a response from the committee, whether or not the committee agrees with the recommended change. In addition, the committee proposes its own changes to the document. Sometimes these changes are made to clarify requirements, and often the changes are made due to changes in information or technology. All changes to the code or standard require a simple majority vote at the meeting but ultimately require a two-thirds ballot of the entire committee after the meeting. Once
balloting is completed, a first draft report is published. This report explains what changes have been made to the document and includes responses to the public inputs. The report is then open for public comments, and the public can look at the changes made to the document and can comment on them.

The second part of the revision process takes place at the second draft meeting held about a year after the first draft meeting. All public comments are considered at the meeting, and the committee provides an action and response to each public comment. The committee will use the public comments to help develop second revisions to the standard, which results in a complete and fully integrated second draft. Like the first draft, the second draft has initial agreement by the committee based on a simple majority vote during the meeting to establish a consensus. A ballot establishes the committee’s final position.

At that point, unless there is a challenge to the document, the document becomes a consent document and will be published. Specific rules for “challenging” the document are included in NFPA’s rules and regulations.

To submit public input or public comments to a document during its revision, visit www.nfpa.org/(document#). For example, www.nfpa.org/33 will take you directly to NFPA 33. Click on the Next Edition tab to submit public input online or to check submission deadlines. To determine which documents are accepting public input and public comments, visit NFPA’s document information page at www.nfpa.org/aboutthecodes and search by document number or cycle using the “Find a Code or Standard” box on the right side.

You can stay up-to-date on codes and standards activities in two ways. For specific documents, sign up for alerts sent right to your e-mail inbox when information on a particular document is posted on the respective document information page. You can also sign up for alerts at the top of each document information page by clicking on “receive e-mail updates on this document.” For news on all NFPA standards, subscribe to NFPA News, NFPA’s free electronic newsletter that provides detailed information on all NFPA standards activities, such as revision schedules, requests for comments on documents and new projects and the issuance of formal interpretations, tentative interim amendments and erratas.

The NFPA standards-making process has supported NFPA’s mission to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life for more than 100 years. Better participation makes for better standards. NFPA encourages you to get involved by submitting input and comments on standards under revision, attending committee meetings and joining a technical committee.

Nancy Pearce, CIH, is a senior fire protection engineer at NFPA in Quincy, MA. She previously worked with the Massachusetts Department of Labor.