Memo

Prepared by the North Dakota Legislative Council
staff for the Legislative Management Committee
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BILL STATUS SYSTEM - ON-LINE ACCESS

BACKGROUND

The bill status system began in 1969 as a Legislative Council computerized in-house report that provided day-old information concerning the progress of bills and resolutions through the legislative process. The system evolved to an on-line system providing up-to-the-minute information on the status of bills and resolutions for use by legislative personnel and outside users. State agencies that paid normal mainframe monthly access fees and per second computer usage charges could obtain access without special permission from the Legislative Council. In addition to state agencies, a number of other entities have gained access through arrangements with the Legislative Council and the Information Services Division.

In 1995, 75 entities other than state agencies were authorized access. Those users paid a $250 subscription fee, a $19.50 per month access fee, and a computer usage charge of $.59 per CPU second. In total, subscribers paid $18,750 in subscription fees and $9,010.56 in access and usage charges (a total of $27,760.56). The average fees and charges per user was $370.14, and charges paid by individual users ranged from $270.11 to $1,155.13.

During the 1995-96 interim, a survey of state agencies and private subscribers indicated that 87 percent of the state agencies and 80 percent of the private subscribers would be able to make use of Internet access to the bill status system. As a result, the Legislative Management Committee approved a policy of making access to the on-line bill status system during the 1997 session through the Internet rather than through direct or phone-in access. The committee approved a subscription fee of $400 for access to the bill status system. Of that fee, $250 was allocated toward the subscription and $150 was allocated toward the cost of mainframe access provided by the Information Services Division. State agencies paying monthly access fees and per second computer usage charges to the Information Services Division were allowed access without paying the $400 fee, as were any government entities having Internet access through the Information Services Division. During the 1997 session, 62 entities subscribed to the on-line bill status system and paid a total of $24,800 in subscription fees.

INTERNET ACCESS TO BILL INFORMATION IN OTHER STATES

The home page of the National Conference of State Legislatures lists Internet links for the legislative branch in each of the 50 states. The information obtained from those sites is the basis for this portion of the memorandum. The sophistication of the legislative sites varies greatly from state to state, e.g., the Alabama site provides limited biographical information, a graphical description of how a bill becomes a law, standing committee membership lists, and a map of voting districts, while the North Carolina site provides comprehensive searching capabilities.

Except for Minnesota, each state's web site was visited in September 1997 to determine the extent of bill status information available from that site. Access to the Minnesota site was not available. Forty-five states provide some type of bill status information. Of the 45 states, these states provide limited information with respect to bill text or status: Kentucky's information consists of a list of prefiled bills by number, a list of prefiled bills by subject matter, and a summary of each bill; Louisiana's information consists of bill text and current status; Massachusetts' information consists of a summary of each bill and its most recent status in each house; New Hampshire's information consists of abbreviated titles of bills and identification of the bills' sponsors, daily calendars (which include committee hearing schedules), and daily journals; New Mexico's information consists of bill text; the New York Senate and the New York House provide different methods of accessing bill information; Oklahoma's information consists of abbreviated title descriptions of bills; West Virginia's information consists of a list of bills on which legislative action has been completed; and Wyoming's information consists of bill titles and actions. The states whose legislative branch web sites do not provide any type of bill status or bill text information include Alabama, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

A few states offer bill status information on a subscription basis in addition to the information available without charge:

1. Kansas offers a subscription for a specialized legislative tracking service (no information was available as to how to subscribe or the cost of the subscription).

2. The Louisiana Senate offers a "Louisiana Legislative Subscriber System" (LAScribe) that includes House and Senate bill status, a personal bill tracking package, text of bills and resolutions, Louisiana laws, the Louisiana Administrative Code, committee meetings and agendas, and the ability to print but not download any of these items under two basic packages--package 1 is a $125 hookup charge and a four-month contract at $75 per month for one hour of free service each month and a charge of $1.50 per minute for each minute over the one free hour, and package 2 is a $125 hookup charge and a 12-month contract at $50 per month for one hour of free service each month and a charge of $1.50 per minute for each minute over the one free hour.
3. Maryland offers a real time subscription service (legislative information on the web site is updated each night during the session, and the real time subscription service provides access to continuously updated information). The subscription includes current information on House and Senate proceedings and bill information and status. The subscription is offered at $800 per calendar year.
4. During the 1997 legislative session, North Dakota offered access to bill status and text information only to subscribers who paid a six-month subscription fee of $400.

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY LEGISLATIVE TRACKING SERVICE

Representatives of North Dakota State University have expressed interest in providing a legislative tracking service. A legislative tracking service offers the subscriber/user the ability to identify specific measures, and information is provided for those measures rather than for all measures. North Dakota State University has offered this service in the past and is considering enhancements to the service in cooperation with the Legislative Council and the Information Services Division.

PROPOSED PLAN FOR ON-LINE BILL STATUS INFORMATION DURING 1999 SESSION

1997 Plan and Recent Developments

Access to the on-line bill status system was first provided to private entities in 1981 and those entities paid a monthly computer access fee and a computer usage charge per CPU second. A subscription fee in addition to these monthly access fees and computer usage charges was established in 1991. A result of imposing the subscription fee was that subscribers expected a high level of personal service for that fee. The Legislative Council office started receiving numerous calls from subscribers. Questions range from "how do I _____" to complaints about the contents of the system. An estimate of the time spent providing bill status access to paid subscribers during the 1995 session was 150 hours prior to the session, not including the time spent by personnel of the Information Services Division in preparing bills, handling deposits, and collecting accounts. During the 1995 session, calls were received on a regular basis with respect to questions on the bill status system. The number of calls ranged from 60 to 75 a day during the first two weeks of the session to one to three a day near the end of the session. After the session, a number of calls were received requesting continued access to the system throughout the interim.

During the 1995-96 interim, the Legislative Management Committee approved a policy of making access to the on-line bill status system during the 1997 session available only through the Internet upon payment of a subscription fee of $400. Reasons for providing this access included (1) the Legislative Council had developed an Internet home page for the legislative branch and this could be the means to provide access to the bill status system; and (2) involvement by the Legislative Council staff and personnel of the Information Services Division would be reduced because, presumably, a person acquainted with the Internet could access information without requiring special, personalized help. State agencies paying monthly access fees and per second computer usage charges to the Information Services Division, as well as any government entity having Internet access through the division, were not subject to the fee.

Although the number of questions and calls immediately before and during the 1997 session was lower than in the past, there were still a substantial number of callers to the Legislative Council. The general nature of most calls can be categorized into two groups. First, many people tried to avoid paying the subscription fee by "piggybacking" onto free users. For example, county offices, cities, and political subdivision associations wanted free access by obtaining access through the county register of deeds' access to the mainframe computer, state associations wanted to be considered as governmental entities, political subdivisions with access to the state's mainframe computer wanted free access even though they did not have Internet access through the Information Services Division, and federal government agencies wanted free access by obtaining access through state agencies. Second, some users were dissatisfied with the new access and its requirements:

1. The Legislative Management Committee selected Windows 95 (a 32-bit operating system) as the operating system for personal computers used by legislators. As a result, the Internet web page was developed using Windows 95, and anyone who attempted to obtain access to the bill status system initially was required to use a 32-bit operating system, e.g., Windows 95 or OS/2 Warp.
2. The priority of the Legislative Council staff during the days immediately preceding the session and the first two to three weeks of the session was of necessity working with legislators and their notebook computers at the expense of resolving problems with the Internet bill status system, e.g., text of bills was not available during the first week of the session.
3. The bill status system consists of two parts on the Internet--(a) actions and (b) text--and a number of users had difficulty switching between the two systems until a "helpful hint" on how to use two windows at the same time was placed on the web page.

The subscription fee imposed for access to the 1997 on-line system was a fee for six months' access and original plans were to shut down the system as of July 1, 1997. In May and June several requests were received to continue allowing access to the system. If such access were to be continued, a means was necessary to avoid the incurring of mainframe usage charges (which were offset by a portion of the $400 subscription fee for the first six months of 1997). A reason for mainframe charges is that the bill status system consists of two parts--status and text. Status information is provided on a "real time" basis, e.g., information is available the moment it is entered by the appropriate legislative employee, whether it is the vote totals when the key is closed on the floor or a change to the committee hearing schedule by a committee clerk. After the Legislative Assembly adjourned and final entries are made, e.g., final signings or vetoes by the Governor, the system is "frozen" and no further changes are made. In June 1997 the Legislative Council staff moved the text of bills and journals to a server-oriented environment and thus no mainframe access charges were incurred for obtaining that information. As a result, the legislative branch site was revised to allow access to text of bills and journals without regard to payment of a subscription fee. The Legislative Council staff is also developing a method of moving the subject index and bill action information, which is now frozen, to a server-oriented environment for inclusion on the web page, which will improve the usability of the bill and journal text information.

Proposed Plan

A suggestion for providing access to the on-line bill status system through the Internet during the 1999 session is that access be provided under two options. Under option 1, bill and journal text, and bill status actions and the subject index from the bill status system, would be "frozen" and placed in a server-oriented environment. This information would be updated once a day (either late in the evening or early in the morning). Because this information would not reside on the mainframe and no computer usage fees would be incurred, the information could be provided at no charge. Under option 2, bill status system information that resides on the mainframe (and is used to provide real time information to legislators) would be provided on a subscription basis to anyone who desired information on a "real time" basis. This information would include all the information available from the bill status system, e.g., bill and journal text, bill status actions, subject index, bill summaries, daily calendars, and committee hearing schedules. The subscription fee would be used to recover the computer usage costs incurred for providing access to the mainframe. This proposed plan is similar to the service provided by the Maryland General Assembly.