



March 13, 2009

Office of the Attorney General
The Capitol
Albany, NY 12224-0341

VIA USPS AND FAX TO (212) 416-8369

Re: Recommendations to Strengthen Project Sunlight

Dear Attorney General Cuomo:

On behalf of Common Cause/New York, I would like to commend you and your staff for your work to further the transparency and accessibility of legislative, lobbying and financial information through the Project Sunlight web portal.

Project Sunlight collects and standardizes various data elements scattered throughout New York State's websites, making it available in a comprehensive and easy to use website. The web portal is unique in the diversity and quantity of information it brings together on one website, in both the private and government sectors, and its explanatory videos assist members of the public to learn to navigate the site. This greatly enhances the ease with which users can learn to search for and understand the information provided.

Even though it is a model which outperforms any comparable site, specific aspects of Project Sunlight could be improved, and we would like to offer our thoughts in this regard.

1. Lobbyist Searches: When searching for a bill number and then selecting 'who lobbied on this bill,' the results include the client name, bill numbers, name of lobbyist, reporting period and bi-monthly year. Unquestionably, this provides very valuable interactive analysis. Nevertheless, we have noted that financial information is not included in the returns of this initial search. It is necessary to select the company name and to be taken to a different page to review their financial details. By not including this information in the initial search results it is not possible to view together the financial details for the companies who lobbied the bill. It is not possible to 'select all' to see the financial information for several companies at one time, nor is it an option to export this information. We propose that all the financial information; total compensation, total expenses and total reimbursed, should be included with the other information initially displayed for a 'who lobbied this bill' search. This will make it easier for New Yorkers to gauge the comparative amount spent by lobbyists registered under a particular bill. Also, bill search results do not differentiate between Senate and Assembly bills, returning results for both regardless of whether you place an "S" or "A" indicator before the bill number. This complicates the search results for the user, especially those with less experience reviewing lobbying or legislative records.

2. Full Bill Text for Current and Previous Legislative Years: Basic bill information is available on Project Sunlight, and we are pleased to see the recent addition of a function allowing users to specify which of the two most recent legislative sessions they wish to search. We find it reassuring that you and your staff continue to upgrade the functionality of the site. For a complete copy of the bill text, however, it is necessary for a web user to leave Project Sunlight and visit the state legislature's website. This ensures the most timely, publicly-available version of the bill will be consulted, but we look forward to the inclusion of direct links to full bill text from all legislative sessions in future incarnations of Project Sunlight. We suspect linking to the full bill text from prior legislative sessions may be a technical obstacle that must be addressed by the legislature's information technology team, and we hope that is an issue you plan to address.
3. Voting History: Project Sunlight provides links for legislation sponsored by each legislator, but it does not provide the full voting history for legislators. Voting histories are a valuable tool for a member of the public to track their legislator's record and performance, and to gauge the impact of the financial data which the site correlates. This, again, does not seem to be readily available on another public electronic venue available to New Yorkers. This would be an invaluable resource for Project Sunlight to develop independently or with the assistance of other state resources, such as the Legislative Retrieval Service. Providing categories by which to search voting records would be invaluable, as most members of the public conducting searches on legislation know which topic they are interested in and would be specifically interested in a legislator's record on their particular issue area of interest.
4. Legislative Summaries: A bi-weekly or monthly legislative summary would be a valuable addition to Project Sunlight. Summaries offered by the Legislative Retrieval Service, which is already produced by state employees on state time but unavailable to the public, could provide a valuable model. Creating a summary that is accessible to New Yorkers without extensive experience in tracking legislation would be an invaluable resource. The objective would be to allow casual visitors to the site to briefly survey recent legislative activity.
5. Interactivity and Visitor Numbers: The site has received 250,000 page views since its launch in 2007.¹ While this is an impressive number, we believe it can be increased given the relevance of the site's information. We think traffic may be limited partly due to the static look and feel of the homepage. This may dissuade visitors from exploring the site and making full use of the valuable information it offers. We also suggest the introduction of other interactive facilities on the web portal, to enable constituents to share their views, beyond the email form currently on the site. These could include a comments forum, video addresses from assembly members and video footage of legislative sessions. In addition, the site may be difficult to find for some New Yorkers, as internet searches using keywords like 'government transparency New York' do not return Project Sunlight in the first pages of results. We encourage you to consider outreach efforts to attract greater visitor numbers and we would be happy to speak with you about various outreach and visibility efforts on this end.

¹ The Capitol, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 2009. Page 19

6. Legislative/Public Hearing Calendars: In order for the public to feel fully informed of the actions of their elected representatives it would be beneficial for Project Sunlight to include information of legislative and public hearing calendars, committee schedules and agendas. This information would allow members of the public to voice their opinions to their representatives ahead of votes and in public hearings. Making subscriptions available through email and Real Simple Syndication (RSS) subscription would be invaluable for New Yorkers throughout the state interested in tracking legislative developments in particular issue areas.

We applaud you for the proactive steps you and your staff have taken to develop Project Sunlight. You and your staff deserve much credit for conceiving and executing this reform in such an effective manner. In the long term, however, Common Cause/New York recommends that a means should be found to help insulate Project Sunlight from the ebbs and flows that naturally come from one administration to the next, as not all attorneys general will have the same level of interest in transparency, similar willingness to provide a full complement of staff to make the site timely and effective, or encourage new and "user-friendly" ways to use various types of data available from various state agencies and entities. One means of addressing this long-term problem would be to have such a resource coordinated and hosted by an agency outside the electoral arena. If such a "re-housing" of the Project were not feasible, then securing dedicated state funding for Project Sunlight independent of the Attorney General's patronage should be a priority.

We also believe that you and your staff are in a unique position to recommend changes to the way information is tracked in the various databases which Project Sunlight correlates in such an impressive fashion, after more than two years of detailed familiarity with those databases. A sophisticated inter-relation tool, such as Project Sunlight, is only as good as the data that it analyzes. Common Cause/New York urges you and your staff to issue a public report making recommendations to the Legislature and the agencies which compile the data the site uses on ways to improve the underlying data, including statutory changes that would implement your recommendations.

Common Cause/New York regards Project Sunlight as a leading source of publicly-available government information and, in certain respects, a unique model of government transparency throughout the United States. With the incorporation of the above recommendations, and dedicated resources to support its long-term development, Project Sunlight can go even further towards fostering transparency throughout the legislative process in New York State and maintain its cutting-edge status.

We look forward to working with you to strengthen Project Sunlight even further and would be happy to meet to discuss our proposed improvements.

Sincerely,



Susan Lerner
Executive Director
Common Cause/New York