

LETTERS

This week

A guide to better government

DEC 1, 2010



We look forward to working with the 2011 legislative session.

Many local organizations care deeply about improving public participation in government. We commend the Legislature for improvements in public access in recent years. However, we feel there is a lot more that needs to be done.

It is still very difficult for ordinary citizens to keep up with what is happening at the state Capitol if they cannot be there regularly in person. In essence, this excludes those on Neighbor Islands and those who are busy during the day with work, school or family from participating in the legislative process.

A diverse group of 18 citizen organizations recently signed letters to all state senators and representatives. We asked for several legislative process changes that would make the state Capitol more open and accessible for ordinary citizens.

For the coming session, we ask the Legislature to adopt the following rules/practices to make the legislative process more open for all of us.

Without the ability to watch the hearings and floor sessions, a huge segment of our population is excluded from observing the legislative process. With fewer newspapers and TV news outlets in town, news coverage about the Legislature is limited, further removing citizens from the process. We ask that you take the opportunity to address this problem by using the technology we currently have at our disposal. [Here are some of our recommendations]:

1. Allow more notice time for all legislative hearings—at least three business days (exclude holidays and weekends). The Legislature moves very quickly, and the issues are often very complex. More lead time will allow more citizens and organizations to submit meaningful testimony. Currently, the Senate requires a three-calendar-day notice (for the first committee only), and the House requires only two days notice.

We recognize that the legislative calendar is tight, but we feel this is an important change. With the existing short notice, it makes it extremely difficult for ordinary citizens to write testimony—and almost impossible—to rearrange their work or personal schedules to attend a hearing. We ask the Legislature to give more notice and explore any other ways to make it easier for citizens to provide their input.

In case of emergency situations in which hearing notice requirements need to be waived, the legislative body should take a recorded vote on the waiver to ensure accountability for implementing these rules.

2. Proposed bill amendments should be posted online ASAP. We applaud the Legislature’s success in posting many documents online. But often, major changes are made to large and complicated bills, and citizens do not get the opportunity to examine the amendments in depth.

Proposed amended versions are sometimes (but not consistently) available online, and at other times they are not available to the public until much later in the process. In some instances, proposed amendments are only available in hard copy by visiting the

committee chair's office.

This makes it impossible for those who cannot visit the Capitol to see the proposed amendments. A hard copy could be made available in a Capitol office or distributed at a hearing, as well as posted online immediately for citizens to access electronically.

We have observed committee chairs distributing hard copies of bill amendments at the end of committee hearings. Such amendments clearly have been prepared in advance of the testimony (though we understand that they might be further amended based on testimony). They should be available to the public and to committee members before the hearing.

3. Committee reports on legislative measures should include a list of all organizations or agencies testifying on the topic. Historically, this information was always listed in committee reports, but the Senate has dropped this practice. This makes it more difficult for the reader to identify those who supported or opposed the bill. The Senate should make it more accessible to readers by continuing the useful practice of listing all entities for and against each measure.

We look forward to seeing if any of these changes are initiated and implemented by our legislators.

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