

REPORT TO THE MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE
As Submitted to the Legislative Coordinating Commission, December 20, 2001

Legislative Coordinating Commission
85 State Office Building
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155

SERVICES OF LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION OFFICES

Background

Minnesota Laws 2001, 1st Special Session, Chapter 10 directed the Legislative Coordinating Commission (LCC) to investigate ways in which the public information offices of the House and Senate might reduce costs and increase public awareness by consolidating services.

“The legislative coordinating commission, or a joint subcommittee appointed by the commission for that purpose, must investigate ways in which the public information offices of the senate and the house of representatives might reduce costs and increase public awareness by consolidating some or all of their services, including, at a minimum, the publication of a single schedule for house and senate committee meetings. The commission must report its findings and recommendations to the legislature by February 1, 2002.”

To understand the issues involved, the LCC formed a staff working group. This group began meeting in September 2001.

Public information services are provided by a variety of partisan and non-partisan legislative offices. As the House and Senate structure their offices differently, the actual comparison of office duties is quite complex (see attached spreadsheet). The working group therefore focused on key public information services provided by three offices: House Public Information, Senate Information and Senate Publications. These three offices primarily provide services to the public by answering individual questions in person and over the telephone, and through the publication of various educational materials.

	Constituent Inquiries	Schedule	Weekly News Magazine	Educational Materials
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House Information	X	X	X	X
Senate Information	X			X
Senate Publications		X	X	X

This report is broken down into sections which summarize the offices’ current areas of collaboration, and the pro’s and con’s of consolidating additional services. It also makes recommendations for improving public service.

It was written by Jennifer Ridgeway, Legislative Coordinating Commission. Special thanks go to the members of the working group for their participation and for providing background information:

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- Scott Magnuson, Senate Information
- Lee Lambert, House Public Information
- Michelle Kibiger, House Public Information
- Greg Hubinger, Legislative Coordinating Commission

Providing Public Information

House Public Information and Senate Information serve as the first point of contact for most members of the public. Requests for information vary a great deal in complexity—from individuals who simply want to know who their representative and senator are, to individuals with detailed questions on a specific bill or legislative procedure. In discussing the advantages and disadvantages of combining services, the working group identified two common themes that shape the discussion: the bicameral nature of the legislature and the information offices’ ability to make it as easy to understand as possible; and the many different audiences that each office serves.

Understanding Minnesota’s Bicameral Legislature

The public often views the legislature as a whole, and they do not always discern that the House and Senate operate separately in many regards. This inherent complexity of the bicameral system is a primary argument for combining information offices. The public would be well-served if they could call one phone number or visit one office for information on the legislature as a whole. For example, members of the public are often interested in a particular topic, such as education, and it might be easiest for them to follow education bills as they go through the House and Senate if there were one clearinghouse for information.

However, there are logistical considerations that make the idea of one central space for information services more difficult. If we assume that the current complement of staff would be necessary to carry out the daily operation of the office, one consideration would be the difficulty in securing adequate space for one larger office and the need to maintain a public presence in both the Capitol and the State Office Building.

Another consideration is the difference in structure between House and Senate offices. As the attached chart demonstrates, similar duties are handled by different offices in the House and

Senate. For example, Senate Information distributes materials produced by both Senate Publications and Senate Index. This includes copies of bills. In the House, the public obtains educational materials from House Public Information, but they need to go to the Chief Clerk's Office in the Capitol for copies of bills.

For these reasons, we suggest focusing on a different approach at this time. This approach relies on combining services without combining offices. The current separate information offices strive to meet the needs of the public within the structure of the bicameral legislature. The offices provide as much information about both bodies as possible, while maintaining the expertise and in-depth knowledge made possible by focusing on one.

The information offices believe that the services they offer hinge on their ability to make information accessible and easily digestible for the public. For example, a constituent who calls either office may receive information on the members, meeting schedule and status of bills in both bodies. With access to information on the legislative Web site, this function has become very efficient. Legislative staff in both bodies and in joint offices work together to design and manage a Web site that allows easy navigation between House and Senate information. Constituents can search for a bill in one body, and at the same time access information about the status of that bill in the other body or the status of a companion file.

However, sometimes a detailed question necessitates referring a constituent to the other body. Information office staff believe that they are best able to answer detailed constituent questions by focusing their areas of expertise on the activities, rules and procedural nature of their respective bodies. The trade-off for occasionally needing to speak to two offices is more detailed information. This knowledge and the ability of staff to help constituents navigate the system means that personal customer service is still a very high priority.

If the logistics of a combined office could be addressed, it may still be necessary to structure staff in a manner that maintains this expertise and allows staff to adequately follow the activities of both the House and Senate, especially when meetings and floor sessions are scheduled concurrently.

Serving Many Audiences

The public information offices answer questions and distribute information to various groups: the general public, House and Senate members, legislative and executive branch staff, lobbyists, and students. For the general public and students, public information staff often assist by providing general education pieces and answering specific, often single-issue questions. Legislative and executive branch staff may have procedural questions that require more expertise, while lobbyists may refer to information offices most often for questions on bill status and committee schedules. Even the state operator relies on the information offices as a first point of contact for callers with a variety of government-related questions. A central clearinghouse would provide easy access to information regardless of an individual's level of knowledge regarding the legislative process.

Short of creating one office, however, information staff believe their ability to provide general information on both bodies and specific expertise on one body currently allows them to serve all of these unique audiences well. They also believe they can best educate the public about Minnesota's bicameral system by maintaining separate identities for the institutions.

House and Senate publications are also created with these different groups in mind, and many of their publications serve both bodies. This is one way that the information offices are already collaborating.

Current Areas of Collaboration

Member Directories and Rosters House Public Information and Senate Publications work jointly and share costs for publication of the member directories (the Election Directory and the red and green books), as well as various rosters and lists.

New Laws House Public Information produces this easy to read summary of House and Senate legislation acted on during each session. News Laws lists actions by both bodies, and the Senate pays for one-third of the cost of publication.

Seating Chart This handy map of legislators' seats on the chamber floors—used by both the public and legislative staff—is a joint production by House Public Information and Senate Publications.

State Fair Although the House and Senate maintain separate booths at the fair, they coordinate planning and share physical resources for this event. The booths are located next to each other, and the goal is to appear as seamless as possible to the public.

Professional Development House and Senate information offices develop plans together in conjunction with the needs or requests of NCSL-LINCS (National Conference of State Legislatures-Information and Communications Staff Section). LINCS serves state legislative staff with public information or media relations responsibilities, including public information officers, press secretaries, broadcast staff, writers, producers and civic education directors.

The information offices supervised the development and planned schedules for their staff, the Chief Clerk's Office, and for partisan media staff to promote and conduct a highly successful first official Annual LINCS Seminar at the Capitol in 2000.

District Finder House Public Information compiles and publishes a telephone book-sized directory that is used to look up constituent addresses and determine legislative and congressional districts. This guide is updated after redistricting with data obtained from the Legislative GIS office and the Office of the Secretary of State, and copies are made available to information offices. The guide is also available on computer disk for members of the public. While district finder software is available on the legislative Web site, this directory continues to offer a quick and easy source of information.

International Visitors and Civic Groups Most of the planning with International visitors is conducted by the Legislative Coordinating Commission's International Affairs Coordinator office. However, the House and Senate staff work jointly with the International Affairs Coordinator to ensure that guests have an educational, informative, pleasant and successful stay when they come to the Capitol.

Staff work cooperatively to present a thorough picture of the Minnesota Legislature and its legislative process through informal meetings, a question and answer period, and tours with the visitors. Publications from both offices are shared with the visitors.

Potential Areas of Collaboration

There are information services that remain separate. This report seeks to outline the pro's and con's of combining the following services:

Senate Briefly and Session Weekly These weekly publications both detail actions of the House and Senate taken during the previous week (although Senate Briefly focuses on Senate activities and Session Weekly mainly reports actions in the House).

The styles or formats of the publications are currently quite different. The Senate publication highlights Senate floor action, reviews each committee's work in great detail, and lists the meeting schedule for the coming week. The House publication features articles on select legislative issues, summarizes current legislation by topic area, and lists bill introductions and the committee meeting schedule. Both publications average about 28 pages per weekly issue.

There are two primary arguments for combining these publications: to make information more understandable for the public, and to reduce costs.

While some individuals read both publications cover to cover, others focus on the articles that interest them. A combined publication might better allow people to track issues and legislation by topic. It would also present a more unified perspective for those constituents that see the legislature as a whole, rather than two parts.

A combined publication also may have some potential for cost savings, but the working group outlined some factors that should be considered in analyzing this issue. The first is actual staff time required to cover committee meetings and write material. Each writer spends an average of 48 hours per week on this duty, suggesting that the current complement is needed simply to prepare coverage of hearings. Thus any savings would not necessarily come in the form of staff consolidation.

The length of the publication would be the second consideration. Few pages would be eliminated without significantly changing the scope and content of the publications. Estimates suggest that publishing a single magazine at double the length in order to provide the same level of information would not result in lower costs than the distribution of two separate magazines (see chart below). Furthermore, cost analysis should also consider the vast difference in size between the House and Senate distribution lists; an equitable division of costs would need to be negotiated.

House Information and Senate Publications obtained estimates from their current vendors, and those numbers are included here:

	Distribution List Size (1)	Printing Cost (2)	Mailing Charge: Postage and Mail House Fees (1)	Total Cost
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Session Weekly (28 pages)	22,000	\$6,207/week	\$2,833/week	\$9,040/week
Senate Briefly (28 pages)	6,500	\$2,695/week	\$1,103/week	\$3,798/week
Combined Weekly (56 pages)	23,700	\$12,225- \$13,536/week	\$5,347/week	\$17,572-\$18,883/week

(1) The combined distribution list size was determined by comparing current mailing lists. The 23,700 figure for printing includes copies for in-house distribution. The total to be mailed is estimated at 20,689.

(2) The range in costs for the combined publications represents the different styles (color, paper, photos) of Session Weekly and Senate Briefly.

This chart assumes that the weekly magazine would continue to offer a significant amount of information, about 56 pages. (The majority of readers answering publication surveys in recent years indicate that the current 28-page average should be maintained.) Based on that assumption, the chart demonstrates that even with a smaller number of issues being printed and distributed (based on eliminating duplication across the mailing lists), total costs would not be lower with a combined publication because the total number of pages being printed and mailed would actually increase.

Other considerations include the possibility of publishing a single but longer piece in one evening—the standard timeline used now so that information is as current as possible. Both offices cover committee meetings up until late Thursday, sending the issue to press that evening for immediate distribution on Friday. Current print and mail house vendors have indicated that publication and distribution of such a lengthy document would be very difficult in one evening, but possible.

Finally, while both publications have evolved over the years, staff maintain that Session Weekly and Senate Briefly continue to reflect the needs of their respective readership. These needs are reviewed annually by distribution of a reader survey. Survey questions have focused on the publications' content. We suggest that future surveys consider questions on the public's perception of access to legislative information (see recommendations on page 8 of this report), and that this information shape future discussions about collaboration.

Committee Meeting Schedule House Public Information and Senate Publications publish separate committee meeting schedules. In recent years, the Senate has moved to a Web-based schedule only. Committee staff notify Senate Publications of meetings, and Senate Publications edits and posts the information on the Web site. A paper copy is not distributed, although individuals who stop by Senate Information may receive a paper copy printed from the Web site.

House Information edits and publishes both a paper and Web-based schedule, based on notices submitted by committee staff. Both offices also provide their schedules via "listservs," broadcast messages sent out by email. Most committees also operate their own listservs.

The primary argument for consolidation is to increase customer service to the public. In this case, an individual would be able to review one document to find meetings of interest, rather than comparing two. This would be especially beneficial to the general public and lobbyists who follow bills in both bodies, often on a daily basis. It would also be helpful for individuals

following conference committee activities—a task that currently involves regular comparison of both schedules.

The working group identified the following issues for consideration when discussing consolidation of the schedules:

- **Size.** Each schedule gets longer as the committees approach deadlines. A combined schedule would allow people to scan one document. On the other hand, it would double the amount of information. This may require extra reading for House and Senate members and staff whose primary interest is the schedule of one body. This problem might be overcome by formatting the schedule so readers could easily identify House and Senate meetings.
- **Editorial oversight and format.** The offices noted that they both spend considerable time editing and formatting meeting information so that the schedule is concise and easy to read. They believe that this function of editorial oversight is central to producing an accurate and useful schedule. They also raised questions about whether the significant differences between House and Senate standing committee times and committee scopes would make a combined schedule cumbersome to follow.
- **Distribution.** The House continues to produce a paper copy of the schedule, which is distributed daily during session to House members, staff and various offices in the Capitol complex. The decision to continue this practice is based primarily on positive feedback from House staff. The Senate no longer distributes their own paper schedule, and presumably would not want to begin production and distribution of a combined paper schedule.

Despite concerns about procedure and format, the offices have been discussing possible advances in the committee schedule. The discussion is focused on a Web-based program that would allow users to create a custom schedule, displaying only the specific information that they want. For example, a schedule might include only those meetings that fall on a specific day or time, meetings of certain committees, or committees that are hearing a particular bill. It would allow the user to have as much or as little information as he wants, including meetings of both bodies.

The system is based on the premise that committee staff would submit meeting notice information directly to a database, designed by House and Senate information systems departments. Users would choose options on the Web site to determine how much information to display on the screen. Custom schedules could also be printed from the Web site.

The system offers a great deal of flexibility for users, and it would serve the needs of many audiences—including both those who want separate schedules and those who prefer one. However, the system is still being developed, and both information office and information systems staff agree that certain steps will need to be taken. These include:

- **Participation by many offices.** The schedule involves many parties, including but not limited to information and publications offices, information systems offices, and committee staff. A new system such as this will require participation by all of these groups.
- **Format and editorial oversight.** Currently House Information and Senate Publications spend considerable time in editing meeting information. The advantage of having committee

staff submit information to a Web-based schedule automatically is the immediate availability of meeting information for the public. The disadvantage is potential inconsistencies based on the number of people submitting notices directly to the schedule. Maintaining a central editor to proof notices might be one solution to this problem.

- **Financial investments.** The final format and procedure for such an electronic schedule will need to be finalized in order to better understand potential cost savings. Proposed financial investments in the project include staff time for planning and computer programming, and the purchase of computer software and hardware. In the case of the Senate IT department, it will require a new dedicated job position (the House already has such a position in place). These investments will also support other technological efforts to make additional legislative information available to the public on the Web site.

Other Publications Both House Information and Senate Publications create a variety of educational publications. For example, House Information publishes the *Minnesota State Government Series* (an eight-piece packet), a coloring book of state symbols, and *Come to the Capitol* (a practical guide for visiting the Capitol). Senate Publications produces *Guide to the Minnesota Senate*, *Inside the Senate*, and *A Guide for Kids*. Each office keeps a listing of all available materials, and they share resources. They also communicate on a regular basis to ensure that duplicate pieces are not being produced.

The majority of House and Senate publications—including *Session Weekly* and *Senate Briefly*—are also available electronically on the legislative Web site.

Recommendations

Measuring public interest

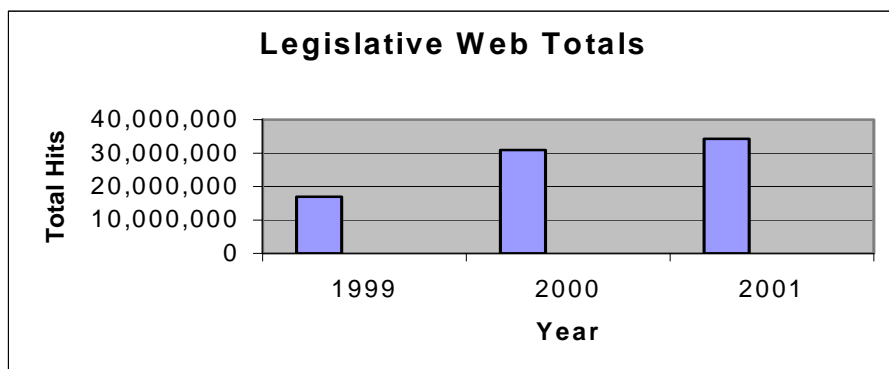
This report makes several assumptions about the needs of the public in accessing legislative information. In order to analyze these issues better, we suggest that the information offices poll the public, members and staff to determine what needs really exist, and where offices can improve services. This should be a coordinated effort between House and Senate information offices, and it might include such strategies as reader surveys or focus groups. Current annual reader surveys provide valuable information about the structure and content of the weekly magazines, but they stop short of asking questions about the public's perception of access to legislative information or the desire for combined offices or services.

This information—as well as financial considerations—should drive future discussions about a change in or consolidation of services or offices. Discussions should continue to involve a variety of information office staff, drawing upon their expertise.

Providing bicameral information

The offices should continue to provide information on both the House and Senate, to the greatest extent possible. Regardless of whether the offices remain physically separate, the legislature should appear seamless and accessible to the public.

The legislative Web site facilitates this effort, and both the public and staff are utilizing the Web in record numbers—an increase of 102% since 1999.



The offices should continue their efforts to make legislative information on the Web site as uniform as possible.

We suggest that the Legislative Networking Group (LNET) be used as a place for offices to discuss this technology-based collaboration on a regular basis. LNET is comprised of staff from many different House, Senate and Joint Department offices, and it is facilitated by a staff member from the Legislative Reference Library. The group has been instrumental in creating a bicameral approach to information on the Web site.

Weekly magazines

Again, there are two main reasons for combining publications: anticipated cost savings, and increased ease of access to information.

There do not appear to be immediate cost savings in combining publications in their current format. If in the future readers suggest that a combined, much shorter publication is desired, further analysis of savings—primarily in printing and mailing—might be warranted.

A combined publication would certainly make access to legislative information easier for many people. Given logistical issues and the absence of significant cost savings, though, we suggest that Session Weekly and Senate Briefly remain separate at this time. However, they should detail information about activities in the other body as much as possible. For example, an article on an education bill should list both House and Senate authors and the status of the bill in both bodies. This is happening to an extent already.

Again, future decisions about the publications should be guided in part by a process of public input that asks specific questions about what people want in terms of combined information services.

Committee schedule

In regard to the physical distribution of the schedule, the Senate is now relying solely on an electronic schedule. We suggest that House Information poll House staff and members to determine whether they want to continue receiving a paper schedule, and a decision about its effectiveness should be made. (The paper schedule is printed internally by House Duplicating.)

Given this difference in distribution between the House and the Senate, and the fact that a combined paper schedule would not result in significant cost savings at this time, we suggest that the offices instead continue their efforts to create a Web-based combined schedule.

The Web site schedules are already popular sources of information, and a Web-based schedule that could be customized seems like the logical next step. It is a project that requires the input of many different groups, and will necessitate some financial investments. However, the offices are already working to address the logistical issues outlined in this report. We suggest that the offices continue these discussions. Once the project is more clearly defined, cost savings should be analyzed.

At this time, House and Senate information offices should continue to utilize the Web site for access to information on the other body's schedule. Callers should be able to ask questions about meetings of both the House and Senate, and access to schedule information on the Web site should be as seamless as possible. Information offices and information systems departments should continue to work with the Legislative Networking Group (LNET) to make the legislative Web site as uniform and easy to navigate as possible.

Continued regular communication among offices

House and Senate information offices have already combined several large publications such as the Member Directory and New Laws. Based on the logistical considerations of completely combining physical offices, we suggest that they rather continue to focus on combined or collaborative services at this time. This collaboration depends on communication between the offices.

Offices currently rely on casual discussions to keep informed about developments, such as a new publication being planned by one of the offices. While this process has been adequate to date, we suggest that the offices consider talking more formally on a regular basis to review projects and identify any areas for possible collaboration. This might begin with planning for activities to measure public interest in combined services.

Comparison of Duties: House and Senate Information Offices

	Constituent Inquiries	Schedule	Weekly News Magazine	Educational Materials	Staff Directory	New Laws (1)	Photo	State Fair	Directory (2)	Copies of Bills (3)	Status of Bills
House Information	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Senate Information	X			X				X		X	X
Senate Publications		X	X	X		X			X		
Senate Media (4)				X	X		X				
Chief Clerk-Front Office										X	
Chief Clerk-Index											X

(1) House Information produces New Laws for distribution by both the House and Senate. The Senate pays for one-third of the cost.

(2) House Information and Senate Publications work jointly on the Red and Green books.

(3) Senate Information is the public distribution office for materials produced by Senate Publications and Senate Index, including copies of bills. These Senate Offices fall under the purview of the Secretary of the Senate. House Information is the public distribution office for materials produced by that office. They direct the public to House Index and the Clerk's Office for status and copies of bills.

(4) Senate Media also provides legislative television coverage.