

Why Does GA Partially Shield The Sunlight?

Sunday, Mar 16, 2008 - 12:05 AM

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Virginia sunshine is beautiful, but it doesn't reach every corner of Capitol Square. Energy is needed to get our General Assembly operating entirely in a transparent light.

Virginians pride ourselves on having many high-tech companies within our borders, so we should do business using technology. We also want to see our elected representatives in action, and technology can help.

The Virginia Senate broadcasts live, on streaming video via the Internet. Yet only 200 Internet links are available to the public. Considering our population of more than 7 million, the number of links for public access should be increased. The House of Delegates should also allow broadcast of its proceedings. A better solution would be full live cable coverage of both chambers with video repeats. Many local governments have cable channels to similar programming.

The Legislative Information System (LIS) Web site ranks high with users, but in searching for bills on a particular topic, people need a broader list of key words. The legislative information staff should expand the LIS index and add greater cross-referencing.

Most Virginians don't know how to use our legislature's Web site. The Library of Virginia should train at least one staff member from each county library on the bells and whistles of this excellent resource. Ultimately, every library should offer a course in how to use this Web site. High school government classes should also teach students how to access information on the LIS.

When following an issue, citizens often discover a piece of legislation has gone missing in action in the House. Either a subcommittee killed it, leaving no record of how members voted, or a full committee received it but never put it on the agenda. The rules should mandate that every bill introduced gets heard in public session, with a recorded vote listed on the LIS system.

House subcommittees require only five members. Thus three delegates make a quorum and two can quietly dispose of any bill. All items, whether recommended or not, should be heard in full committee. These meetings are critical to legislative action. At least one other state broadcasts committee meetings, along with floor proceedings. Virginia should lead and commit now to ensure that citizens can see the entire lawmaking process on screen -- including committees and subcommittees.

A minimum of 24-hours notice concerning time and place of all legislative meetings will help increase participation. Emergency exceptions should be noted on the LIS and include the reason for the last-minute change. Occasionally committee meetings must be held on the floor of the Senate or House. When this happens, the clerk should announce a little-known rule: citizens are allowed on the chamber floor -- during recess or adjournment -- to attend a committee meeting. A few minutes should be allowed for visitors to enter the chamber.

Email has become a convenient way to contact legislators, yet citizens are not always sure their messages are received. More could be done to assure citizens that their messages are being considered. Even automated email responses would help.

Physical access counts. When walking from the General Assembly Building to the Capitol to view the House or Senate session, citizens are now forced to hike down the hill to the underground Bank Street entrance. Once inside, they must climb all the way back up! This amounts to a major expense of time and effort, especially for older citizens. In previous years, the north entrance offered a good entry point; it should be restored as an option next year.

Direct access to busy lawmakers poses another challenge. The Women's Round Table, moderated by the League (open to all), has met every Wednesday morning during the session for 26 years. It provides a forum for citizens to hear directly from delegates and senators -- and to interact with them on issues before the legislature. Virginians visiting Capital Square should drop in and commend the legislators who take time to participate.

A more open and transparent legislative system would allow citizens from around the commonwealth to be more involved. We elect leaders to solve the problems that face us. It is important that we hold them to the task. Some of these proposals can help our citizen legislators do their jobs and communicate more effectively with their constituents. The General Assembly will serve us well if we keep working to make it shine. Olga Hernandez is the president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia. She may be contacted at info@LWV-VA.org or through the Web site www.lwv-va.org.