

# STEAL THESE IDEAS

25 legislative website innovations that may surprise you.



**BY PAM GREENBERG**

In 2007, State Legislatures featured “25 Great Online Ideas Worth Stealing,” describing creative and innovative features on legislative websites. Since then, we’ve noticed a few suspiciously similar concepts on legislative websites along with more great ideas. Many of them address a growing need for transparency in government, especially online. There are many other impressive websites out there, so keep the great ideas coming!

*Pam Greenberg tracks technology issues for NCSL.*

**NEW YORK**

**Committee websites:** The New York Senate’s committee Web pages offer a doorway into the real world of committee work. Start by viewing the featured video for a committee, or watch the live video if the committee is meeting. Learn when and where the committee meets, add the event to your calendar with the click of your mouse, or sign up for e-mail or RSS—Really Simple Syndication—updates from the committee. And filter the information to view just the topics you are interested in, to see press releases, or to read articles from blogs or newspapers that cover the committee.

**MICHIGAN**

**One-stop bill information:** When considering the merits of a bill, wouldn’t you love to see an easy-to-read summary, clear arguments for and against the bill, a list of supporters and opponents, and a fiscal impact note? How about everything you need to find and track bills, how to interpret the text formatting and color-coded bill history, and more? And if you don’t like the color of the website, change it!

**CONNECTICUT**

**Citizen’s guide:** The Connecticut General Assembly’s Citizen Guide gives simple but

## BUILDING EFFECTIVE WEBSITES

The Congressional Management Foundation, through extensive research, has identified five building blocks of effective online communication that it expects to remain valid over time. The foundation's criteria are used to determine the winners of the Gold, Silver, and Bronze Mouse Awards given to the best congressional websites. The criteria below are shown in order of importance.

**Audience.** The website conveys a clear sense that the office has defined its Web audiences, both those seeking information from the office and those the office wants to target, and has methodically built the site around those audiences.

**Content.** The site provides up-to-date content that is specifically targeted to meet the needs of the defined audiences, attract new visitors and support the goals of the office.

**Usability.** The design and information architecture of the website enhances the audiences' experience by enabling quick and easy access to information and services.

**Interactivity.** Visitors are given opportunities to express their views, and the site fosters on- and off line communication.

**Innovation.** The site employs creative features to enhance a visitor's experience by making it more interesting or easier to use.

thorough information about the legislative process in a way that encourages participation. The site's "Guide to Testifying at a Public Hearing" and "Joining the Debate Video"—produced by CT-N, the state's Public Affairs Network—provide information that illuminates and demystifies the committee hearing process while encouraging citizens of all ages and backgrounds to participate.

### VIRGINIA

A virtual tour: The Virginia General Assembly's online virtual tour shows off the newly restored Capitol. A student points out parts of the site that fit in with school lesson plans and academic standards, a restoration worker highlights the architectural features and improvements to the Capitol grounds, and an actor playing Thomas Jefferson tells about the historical information on the site. Visitors can click on specific items for more details and use their mouse to glide through a 360-degree panoramic view of skylights, floors and different perspectives. FAQs and an accessible version of the site round out the virtual tour.

### WASHINGTON

Online oral histories: Insider stories about backroom negotiations, a hallway called "ulcer gulch," swinging chandeliers and gouges in legislators' desks—you hear it all through the storytelling on this site. You'll learn about turning points in Washington's legislative history and controversies related to redistricting. Visitors can choose to read, watch and listen to stories according to a timeline, by selecting histories of members of the Legislature, or by viewing a map showing the geographic distribution of oral histories.

### FLORIDA

Summaries of government programs: Finding out how your state government operates is easy if you live in Florida. The Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability provides searchable summaries organized by topic or agency. Each describes the purpose, organization, funding and other detailed information about more than 200 major state programs. For example, the state's Disability Determinations program summary describes how claims are processed and how a disability is determined, along with details about how the program is organized and funded.

### MINNESOTA

Legislative Time Capsules: Going back in time is now possible via Minnesota's Legislative Time Capsules. Read the text of the 10 resolutions introduced in 1849, see the committees that were in place in 1917 and watch a video of the House floor proceedings from Feb. 19, 1998? The Legislative Reference Library has statistics and resources from each legislative session, from the First Territorial Legislature in 1849 to the present. Time capsules include information about members, bills, laws, vetoes, dates, special sessions, leadership and more. As time and staffing allow, the site will have election results, legislative district descriptions, and links to books and articles about the activities of each year.

### WASHINGTON

Web services: Legislatures are being urged to become more transparent and to "free" their data. Washington's Web Services provide 24/7 access to real-time legislative information in a standard format. Anyone can download, manipulate, analyze and combine data sources to create new ways to view and interpret legislative information. Legislative district information, for example, might be combined with government statistics to illustrate demographic trends on a map—at no cost to the state. Washington's Web Services are based on widely accepted standards that foster integration and communication between systems.

### UTAH

Social Media/Government 2.0: The Utah Republican Majority's Senate site is committed to informing and engaging the state's citizens through a website that uses technology and social media tools to show the faces, the voices, the opinions, and the day-to-day work of legislators and staff. Beginning with a blog in 1995, the site has kept pace with new social media tools by adding podcasts, text message updates, YouTube videos, a user-controlled Web cam, live-streaming video, Twitter and Facebook updates, and online legislative town meetings.

### TEXAS AND NORTH CAROLINA

Online help: Texas' online help application pro-

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vides a comprehensive directory that answers countless questions about the Legislature's website. Browse the detailed list of topics or enter a term in the search box to get quick and complete answers. North Carolina's Web Site Knowledge Base is similar, but also answers general questions about the legislature itself. Enter a search term or browse through the website to find answers about statutes, qualifications for holding office or legislative jargon.

#### NEW JERSEY

Public records request: The New Jersey Legislature's home page features an easily recognizable logo for the New Jersey Open Public Records Act with an invitation to submit an open records request. The site explains how to make a request, gives an outline of the public's rights under the act and provides an online form to make a request on the spot.

#### WASHINGTON

Video embedding tool: TVW, which webcasts legislative proceedings in Washington, came up with a way to prevent abuse of webcast excerpts. People who want to include TVW's videos on their own websites and blogs can use an embedding tool to place the video directly into their site. The tool allows the external sites to highlight any portion of the footage they want, but keeps other footage available so that the clip is seen in context, in a way that honors the balanced, unedited, gavel-to-gavel nature of TVW programming.

#### DELAWARE AND INDIANA

What have you done for me lately?: Delaware's House Democrats provide constituents links to resources in many areas, such as employment and unemployment; foreclosures and mortgages; affordable housing, credit and money management; cancer treatment; crisis support; and elderly abuse. The site also provides citizens with the names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of their legislator's aide. The Indiana House Republicans' Constituent Services FAQs offer a similar guide to information about voting, property taxes, consumer protection and transportation projects.

#### INDIANA

Online citizen forums: Indiana Senate Demo-

crats held an interactive online forum in 2009 and asked visitors to post questions about changes in Indiana law and what they could expect from state government in the next year. More than 400 people submitted questions and cast votes to identify the most popular questions. Videotaped discussions of the five questions that received the most support were posted online.

#### CONNECTICUT

In-depth information and assistance: Connecticut Senate Republicans and Democrats offer in-depth energy and home heating assistance information and guidance on their websites. The Republicans offer an interactive site with videos and other resources; the Democrats offer similar resources with a Spanish language version.

#### NEBRASKA AND TENNESSEE

Interactive calendars: Nebraska's legislative calendar provides an interactive guide to each day's activity. It includes links to reports,

journals, scheduled hearings and current and upcoming agendas. Tennessee's dynamic calendar has links to agendas and video for events, past and upcoming, with crosslinks to bills and other supporting information.

#### MINNESOTA

Bill tracking with personal notes: Now lobbyists aren't the only ones who can use sophisticated tools to track bills. The Minnesota House of Representatives' MyBills service provides personalized bill tracking with e-mail and RSS notification. The list is updated daily, can be modified throughout the biennial legislative session and has an online tool to keep track of your personal notes and commentary about each bill.

#### PENNSYLVANIA

Professionally produced videos: "i on Pennsylvania" is a biweekly video podcast of public policy issues. Select from a long list of informative video or audio podcasts ranging from medical marijuana to transferring col-

lege credits to jobs, crime, voting and more.

## TEXAS

Accessibility for all: Access to the Texas Legislature’s website and the State Capitol is made easier for the disabled with an online guide explaining how the website is formatted to accommodate the visually impaired through browser software, access keys and a navigation menu. There’s also information about Text Telephone Access, interpreter services and tours using sign language for the hearing impaired. Assistance with physical access is also available, and the site provides a map showing accessible entrances at the Capitol.

## LOUISIANA

Audit reports by district: The Louisiana Legislative Auditor’s office offers a “My District” link that allows legislators to view audit reports that specifically target or relate to issues in their district. The site’s audit report library has a comprehensive database of audits dating to 1995. The most heavily used reports are displayed first, although reports can be viewed by year, agency or parish. Reports are shown with letter grades A through D, which indicate, for example, if a report identified fraud and abuse taking place in the program. The site also provides best practices and legal guidance for local governments.

## ALASKA

Ethics Committee website: Can a legislator use a state-issued BlackBerry for political fund raising or campaigning if the member reimburses some or all of the cost? Are legislative interns subject to the nepotism law? In Alaska, the answers are easy to find on the Legislative Ethics Committee’s website with its searchable database of more than 100 advisory opinions from 1984 to the present. Gifts, board memberships and other disclosures legislators are required to make are shown on the site, and legislators can file those disclosures online. There’s also information about filing an ethics complaint and an online complaint form.

## NEVADA

Online gift shop: Its revenues won’t fix the state budget, and its selection doesn’t yet rival Amazon, but Nevada’s online gift shop has reasonably priced jewelry, books, videos and DVDs, collectibles, toys, games and mugs—all with a Nevada theme. Click to add items to your online shopping cart and make your purchase over the Legislature’s secured site.

## WISCONSIN AND IOWA

Tweeting the legislature: If you are following Wisconsin’s Legislative Reference Bureau on Twitter, you’ll know why Wisconsin’s Cap-

itol dome is illuminated in red every February, and you’ll be the first to know about a great new publication in the bureau’s library. Follow the Iowa Legislative Services Agency’s Twitter feed to keep up with its series on “Pieces of Iowa’s Past” along with fiscal updates and issue reviews.

## MAINE

Ask a librarian: Legislative reference librarians in Maine will research and respond to questions about legal, legislative or governmental issues. Fill out an online form that specifies how you want to receive the information (e-mail, fax, Fedex). The site promises a response within three working days, with in-state requests given priority.

## KENTUCKY

Is there an app for that?: The Kentucky Legislature’s iPhone app gives ready access to information about lawmakers, legislation moving through the General Assembly and legislative news. With one touch on their home screen, iPhone users can pull up key features of the Kentucky Legislature Home Page that have been formatted specifically for their phones.

 **CHECK OUT** a list of links for each of the ideas in this story and more embedded links in the online version of this story at [www.ncsl.org/magazine](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine).

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[National Legislative Services & Security Association \(NLSSA\)](#)  
[National Legislative Program Evaluation Staff \(NLPES\)](#)

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