GOING PAPERLESS

There may never be a completely electronic legislature, but some are getting close.

Montana Senator John Brueggeman, 27, has been using computers as long as he can remember. He supports expanding the electronic capabilities of his legislature. To his right is Senator Don Steinbeisser.

BY GARRY BOULARD

For John Brueggeman, who was in his early teens when e-mail first became available and his early 20s when the dot-com bubble burst, instant electronic information and communication is life-long and natural.

"I've been using computers as long as I can remember," says Brueggeman, who is 27.

Garry Boulard, a frequent contributor to State Legislatures, is a free-lance writer in Albuquerque, N.M.

"And I pretty much do everything that I can with them, such as having all of my banking online. I admit it, I am very much a part of the generation that has grown up and is totally comfortable with computers."

For that reason, it is perhaps no surprise to those who know him that Brueggeman, who is in his first term in the Montana Senate after serving two terms in the House, is an enthusiastic supporter of a proposal to greatly enhance the electronic capabilities of the Montana Legislature.

"There are so many things that we could

be doing in terms of installing a new kind of system that would allow for a 'real-time' legislature where anything that is taking place on the floor would be available on-screen instantly," says Brueggeman. "And not just for the members, but for anyone anywhere who is interested in the proceedings of the Montana Legislature."

Brueggeman is particularly excited about a report released this past October by the Montana Legislative Branch Computer System Planning Council. It outlines the ways the Legislature could significantly extend its electronic services to help lawmakers go about their duties more efficiently and increase contact with constituents.

In the process, the Legislature would be taking a big step forward in becoming paperless, a goal that in recent years has enticed lawmakers across the country.

"Gradually we have become more and more web-based. People can now access either PDF or HTML copies of our bills on our web page," says Susan Fox, the executive director of Montana's legislative services division. "So going paperless really has not been just a goal for us, but something we have been working on day to day."

Fox says the computer system plan that Senator Brueggeman and others are talking about would include a stipend for lawmakers to purchase their own laptops. "If that becomes a reality, we will be much, much closer to being truly paperless."

Since at least the mid-'90s, the world of computers has become more affordable and accessible. Legislatures have been experimenting with the idea of increasing citizen access electronically while also making the documents essential to the lawmaking process available to members online.

That move has taken place at the same time that both the public and private sectors have raised concerns about the increasing amount of paper being used—and often discarded—in the modern work-day world.

DIRECTOR
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"It isn't just your imagination playing tricks on you," says Alvin Keene, the president of the Information Management Institute, which sponsors digital printing industry conferences. "In many circumstances, more paper is being used today than ever before, despite the move toward becoming paperless in government and business."

Industry experts believe that even in the face of the paperless move, paper use will continue to grow. According to the Recycled Products Cooperative, some 4 million tons of copy paper is produced annually in the United States, and will more than quadruple over the next decade.

HEAVY USERS

The amount of paper used by government is particularly extensive, according to the market research firm InfoTrends/CAP Ventures. It says that total consumption of office paper in Washington, D.C., is slated to jump from the 108,600 tons recorded in 2004 to more than 114,000 tons in 2008.

The use of paper at the state level has been also been extensive. "Until roughly four years ago, we would make 110 copies of everything that came out of the legislature," says Laura Clemens, the clerk of the Ohio House of Representatives. "Our biannual budget bill is oftentimes more than 1,000 pages long. So we would be making 100 copies of a thousand pages or more."

"We also put all of the bills, analysis, fiscal notes and committee reports—everything—on paper to copy and distribute. And inevitably the desks of the lawmakers would end up with these daily stacks of paper that were many inches tall," she says.

In Florida, a total reliance on paper not only led to waste but very often to mistakes. "We had our Senate Journal compiled manually by filling in bill numbers and then writing in the senator's name as well as the title of the bill on a piece of paper," says Faye Blanton, the secretary of the Florida Senate. "We were literally cutting and pasting before

we rushed it over to a private printer who typed the whole thing overnight," she says. "And because there was never really enough time and everything was being done by hand, I would say that the margin of error in terms of things ending up in the journal that were incorrect was probably around 40 percent."

But both waste and mistakes have been significantly reduced in Ohio and Florida since the chambers in those states went electronic.

"Everything [in the House and Senate] is now done on laptops, with the exception of amendments, which are available both in paper and on laptop," says Clemens, who estimates that the Ohio House, alone, saves at least $1.5 million a year in paper costs.

Blanton, who remembers that it used to take several semi-trucks to haul away the amount of paper discarded by the Florida Senate at the end of a session, says that measuring the success of going paperless should not be confined to simply how much paper is no longer being used, but also to how it has helped lawmakers become more efficient.

"I don't know how you would put a price tag on this, but now everyone knows what is going on any given moment, and that was not always the case before," she says.

"The system is set up so that any amendment being discussed automatically appears on-screen, while at the same time we are displaying the first two or three paragraphs or page of an amendment on an overhead screen," says Blanton. "So, even if a member is temporarily in a conversation, all he or she has to do is look one or two places and they can immediately catch up."

UNEVEN PACE

Because the concept of going paperless is dependent upon the enthusiasm of legislative leaders, lawmakers and legislative staffs—as well as how much money is available to finance such transitions—the pattern of adaptation across the country has been an uneven one.

The North Dakota Assembly launched a

More Ways to Cut Paper Use

Citizens used to travel to their state capitol to get copies of legislation from the bill room and to find out about committee hearings and schedules. In many states now, they can find almost everything that used to be on paper on the Internet, and they also can watch legislative debate and committee hearings as they occur or at their own convenience.

This year, live floor proceedings were available on the Internet from 40 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Many legislatures are offering webcasts of some committee hearings, and about half the states also make archived floor or committee proceedings available on the Internet. Legislatures also are posting notices of committee hearings online.

Many legislatures now have electronic bill tracking services that allow individuals to subscribe to automatic e-mail notifications about legislative actions, including scheduled committee hearings. At least 17 states offer this type of free e-mail subscription service. Other states provide for bill tracking through the creation of personalized lists online, but do not provide e-mail updates. And a growing number of states are providing updates via RSS (Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary), a service that alerts users to new content on the web, such as committee notices, new actions on bills or news updates.

—Pam Greenberg, NCSL

pilot program made up of eight terminals for its members in 1989 and by the late 1990s had all of its documents, including bills, amendments, schedules, and fiscal notes on-line. The Maine Legislature, says House Majority Leader Hannah Pingree, is "not paperless today in any real sense of the word. And that applies to both the House and Senate.
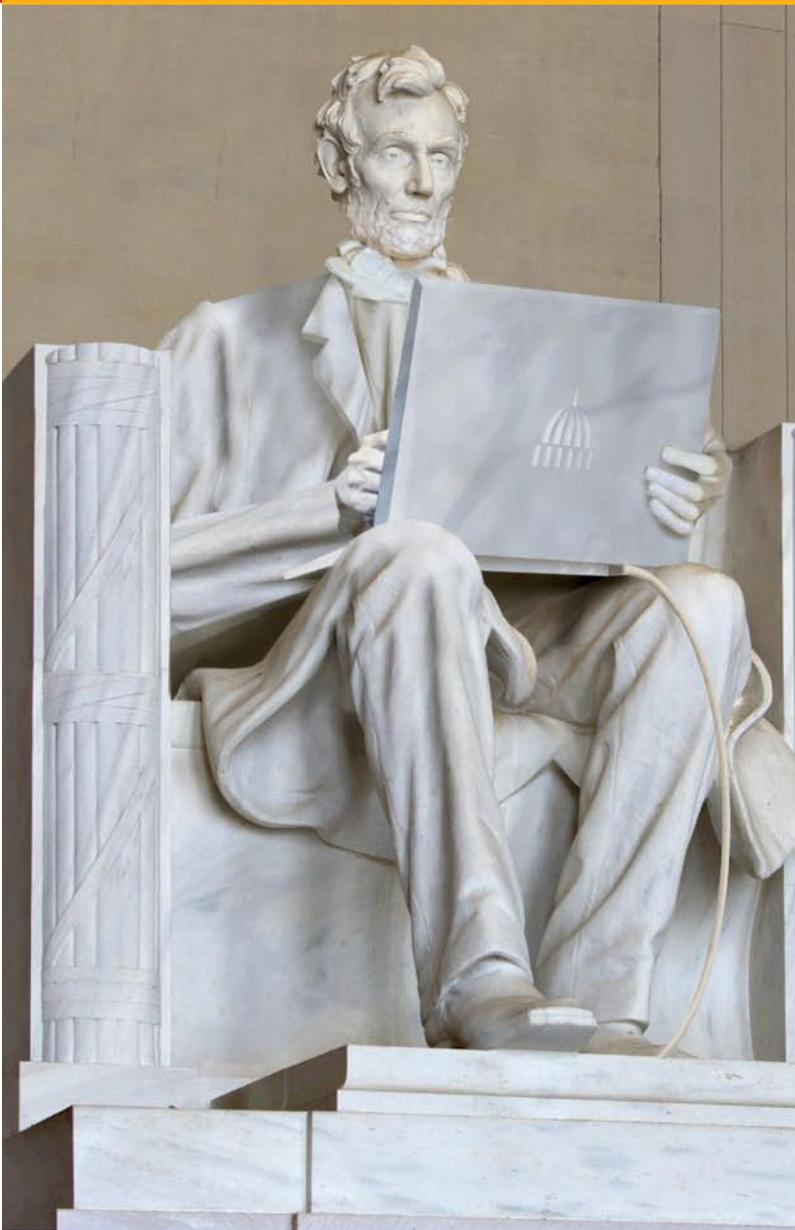
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"Right now it is pretty much an individual thing," she says. "If lawmakers want to use laptops, they can, and I am one who very much does. But basically all of us here are still mostly dealing with the paper world and getting pretty tired of it."

The Wisconsin Assembly decided to go paperless more than seven years ago, buying laptops and docking stations for all 99 members. But the Wisconsin Senate is not there yet, says Marsha Henfer, the director of the Wisconsin Legislative Technology Services Bureau, "but it will only be a matter of time until it happens."

Nevada, meanwhile, will officially go paperless this year, but is bending the concept, says Matthew Baker, the technology manager for the Assembly. "We had a pilot program to see if we could get rid of the bill books that are on the members' desks and hopefully eliminate all of the paper shuffling with the various amendments and so forth

ASSEMBLY

TECHNOLOGY

MANAGER

MATTHEW BAKER

NEVADA

that is going on all of the time in session."

But because an abrupt change to paperless might be disruptive, says Baker, "papers will still be passed out and the members will still have their bill books. So, if they want to use the computer, they can. If they don't, they can still go the traditional route by having paper copies of everything."

COMFORT ZONE

The Nevada experience underlines one of the challenges to going paperless. Some lawmakers, like Brueggeman, have been online since they were adolescents, but others were young adults when television first became available.

"Naturally it is the youngest members who are the most excited about these sorts of things," says Montana's Fox, "and they were the ones who were also the most likely to first use laptops. But more and more older members are using them too. The resistance, I think, is less than was first imagined."

And much of that resistance tends to melt way, says Lou Adamson, legislative information system coordinator in South Dakota, where the move toward going paperless has taken place in increments over the last decade. The key is on-site technical support for legislators center-

ing around how to use increasingly newer systems is available.

"For the first two weeks of our session we have two computer interns come in to help the members," says Adamson.

INFORMATION SYSTEM

COORDINATOR

LOU ADAMSON

SOUTH DAKOTA

"We used to have a more formal type of training session, but that was not as successful, especially if we threw too much at them all at one time. What has worked much better has been to support and help the members when they are actually doing their work, showing them how something can be called up or saved."

Adamson also thinks that it's the lawmakers who are the most reluctant to embrace the new technology that end up being its greatest enthusiasts—if a system offers services that really do make their work less burdensome.

She points in particular to a feature on the members' tablet computers that allows them to call up a bill and write notes on it so they can later compare a newer version and see if their concerns or questions have been addressed. "In terms of just keeping track of things," says Adamson, "these are the kind of services that any member would come to enjoy."

Blanton agrees. "Really, the resistance takes place early in the process. But once the members see that this is something that is going to help make them be more organized, they tend to support it. I think we are at the point now where when you look at the whole question of going paperless, it's hard to find any downside to it."

DON'T FORGET HISTORY

But some lawmakers have worried that in a rush to embrace going paperless, what could be left behind is just as important as what is being saved.

"I am all for any movement that cuts down on waste and reduces paper," says Kay O'Connor, who retired last year from the Kansas Senate. "But we also have to start doing a better job of thinking about our histories. There should always be some sort of paper documentation for everything that a legislature does and it should be preserved in an archive. That is, of course, what we have all traditionally done in years past. But I am concerned that somehow that is going to end."

Such concerns, says Paul Saffo, a Silicon Valley technology forecaster, should not be treated lightly. "Remember microfilm and microfiche? That was supposed to be an earlier substitute for paper, and it did have its place as a publishing medium. But it has turned out to be a really terrible archival medium—film ages, and every time you run it through a machine, it wears down."

The same is true today for those who are "thinking about entering a state of pure paperlessness," says Saffo. "If you think everything can be done digitally with no paper involved whatsoever, you are not being responsible because that is not an accurate understanding of the technology as it exists today.

"I think we are beginning to see the shape of a truly paperless world coming over the horizon, but it isn't here yet, and until it is, state agencies and legislatures would be very wise to maintain some paper copy of everything in a remote low-cost location," Saffo says.

That is advice that many legislative services officials would agree with. "I personally don't think we will ever see the day when we are totally without paper," says Fox. "I actually like paper and agree that paper copies of everything are extremely important for historical purposes."

"On the other hand," adds Fox, "the numbers here show that we are now using paper on an as-needed basis instead of everybody wanting it all of the time. And that is a good direction for us to be going in." 🏛