

# Access room opens door to legislature

## Citizens can go to the Capitol room to keep tabs on their lawmakers

By Alan Matsuoka  
Star-Bulletin



Room 401 at the state Capitol is quiet for the moment, but that's just the calm before the session. "Sometimes it's really out of control, seriously," says Kimo Brown, sitting at his desk tucked safely in a corner.

"You know, we have tons of people all over the place."

The room is called the Public Access Room, and the citizens going there use its services to cajole, inveigh and otherwise keep tabs on the lawmakers chosen to represent them.

According to figures from Brown, the public access coordinator, 810 people filed into the office during the heat of the last legislative session in February, and more than 3,000 during the 1995-96 fiscal year.

"Every year we get more and more people, every year inquiries about our program get larger and larger, especially since a lot of organizations are now making knowledge of us part of their training," said Brown.



### Public access room:

The House and Senate opened the room in 1990, just one of the ways residents will be able track and be part of the issues, debates and - depending on your viewpoint - accomplishments of the upcoming session.

The room has matured this year from being a legislative pilot project to essentially a permanent division of the Legislative Reference Bureau, with \$85,000 in annual funding, Brown said.

The heart of the operation is the ACCESS program, which citizens can use to get full texts of bills and resolutions introduced in the current session, as well as notices of hearings and information about the legislative process.

Five full-time staffers can do deeper searches on request by using Shadow - the legislature's computer system - and, for instance, get the history of bills from earlier sessions on an issue.

Six ACCESS computer terminals are available for public use, including four new IBM-compatible PCs. But anyone with a computer and modem at home can get into the system.

The room also has an electric typewriter and Macintosh Quadra for writing testimony on the spot (time limit: 20 minutes). Staffers can advise on proper formats, and will make as many photocopies as are required by committees. Nearly 78,000 pages were copied during the four months of the last session.

Testimony also can be faxed to the room, and the proper number of copies will be made and delivered by staffers.

Larry Meacham, executive director of Common Cause/Hawaii, called the services "an enormously good thing."

"The Public Access Room is fantastic," he said. "When I talk to people in other states, they really envy the system we have. It's probably the most advanced in the country."

## Television:

Want more than local-news sound bites? In the fifth year of the Legislative Broadcast Project, it'll be easier than ever to be in front of the tube when the floor session, committee hearing or informational briefing of choice is being aired.

Starting with the opening ceremonies on Wednesday, events will continue to be shown live, which means times may vary. But for the first time, rebroadcasts will be made at established times, primarily on VIEWS, one of the channels of Olelo, the Corporation for Community Television.

"We're hoping it'll increase viewership," said Paul Nishijima, the project's assistant production supervisor.

"It allows us to be more effective in promoting it, too."

At least 250 hours of live legislative activity will be seen. Production work, using two portable Olelo studio units, will be done by Honolulu-based Television Ventures, winner of a \$139,000 contract for the year.

The way hearings are selected for broadcast also will likely change.

Before, a hearing usually would be covered if a committee head asked for it; likewise, the chair could veto the camera's presence.

Although new rules have yet to be formally adopted, Nishijima said public interest will be a primary consideration for Senate broadcasts, and committee chairs will no longer have veto power. House rules are still being worked out, he said.

Brown, who oversees the pilot project, said lawmaker attitudes about TV coverage seem to be changing, perhaps reflecting a younger generation's comfort with the technology. For instance, he estimated former Senate Ways and Means Chairwoman Donna Ikeda asked for coverage only once or twice in four years, whereas the committee's new co-chairwoman, Carol Fukunaga, has already let in crews twice for test broadcasts.

"What we are already seeing is a massive increase in desire in the Senate to be on television, to have the hearings opened up more to the public," he said.

The anticipated change should please the Honolulu Community-Media Council which last month - acting on a complaint from GOP Rep. Gene Ward - said the House's method of programming selection had the "potential for partisan control."

## **The Internet:**

The Legislature's move to the World Wide Web is in the fine-tuning stage and most likely will not be fully operational until next year, said Sen. David Ige, who is working on the project.

A legislative Web site should be online this session - an address will be announced soon - which will carry basic information, such as lawmaker telephone numbers and biographical information.

Selected committees also will be experimenting with accepting e-mail testimony.

The goal eventually is to have the system replace ACCESS, and to have e-mail locations for legislators who want them.

The hardware and software are ready, but policies still have to be determined, Ige said. In the meantime, some lawmakers have released individual e-mail addresses.

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