

VERMONT ACCESS NETWORK

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MEMO TO: Senator Joe Benning, Chair and Senate Institutions Committee

FROM: Lauren-Glenn Davitian, CCTV Center for Media & Democracy,
davitian@cctv.org, 802.777.7542

RE: Statehouse Improvements Related to Media Coverage

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your Committee this week. CCTV is part of an ad hoc group of media organizations concerned with matters of public access to and media coverage of the legislative process. These organizations include WCAX, VPR, Vermont PBS and Vermont Access Network.

We appreciate the opportunity to work with the Sergeant at Arms and IT Director as we move forward with this work. We believe that our collective efforts, aided by qualified audio/ video engineering consultation and planning, will yield the best outcome for the Legislature and the legislative process. That is, reliable, up-to-date equipment and infrastructure that supports communications within the State House while opening the doors to the press and people across Vermont.

Use Case: With their colleagues, the media organizations noted above provide audio and video gavel-to-gavel coverage of State House events, including Senate and House chamber and committee meetings, other events and ongoing electronic news coverage. Vermont Access Network, in particular, has an interest in facilitating interactive meeting coverage between the statehouse and community based studios/ meeting rooms.

Local news affiliates, such as WCAX and WPTZ send stand-alone camera set-ups and reporters for regular coverage of floor votes, committee rooms and other Statehouse events such as press conferences.

For special events, such as the opening of the legislature, state of the state speeches or historic votes, PBS will sometimes set up a multi-camera shoot that engage much of the balcony press booth "real estate". In these cases, PBS will offer "pool" coverage to other media outlets, including Vermont Access Network, for

statewide distribution. (PBS is also interested in discussion how it can financially support investments and upgrades as part of this larger project).

WCAX, VPR and others take an intermittent or ongoing audio feed from the House Chamber, and route it directly to their Montpelier bureaus, where they can also share their signal with respective newsrooms. In addition, VPR streams both House and Senate chamber audio, when in session, to the public via streaming services on VPR's website.

WCAX has gone so far as to install its own coaxial and fiber optic cables in and out of the statehouse to improve the quality of their signal and their autonomy in news collection and distribution. VPR has installed a similar arrangement to bring audio feeds from the Statehouse to their Montpelier Bureau.

The TV affiliates, including Vermont PBS, use satellite trucks to distribute the statehouse video signal, but with dedicated bandwidth operating on a low latency network, all media outlets should be able to increasingly rely upon the building's IP based distribution of its programming from the Statehouse.

Current Situation: Today, the House Chamber is served by an analog based audio system that is considered to be "failing". The House contends that there is a pressing need to update the microphones, speakers and "operating system" to a new digital system. Currently audio feeds from the House floor is fed to a "multi-box" or interface that is utilized by various media outlets on a regular basis.

With the planned upgrade of the House Chamber audio, the new digital signal will require not only new distribution "interface", but raises larger questions of storage of the media content, access by people within and outside of the building, and, even, signalling systems.

Based on our review of the K2 assessment and recent discussions with the Sergeant at Arms and the Statehouse IT Director and engineering staff from radio and TV outlets, our ad hoc group anticipates that the House Chamber upgrade from analog to digital has direct implications for the design and upgrade of future, expected conversions of the Senate Chamber and committee rooms, large and small, and b/ how Vermont (and other) media organizations will accessing and distributing the proceedings/news from these locations in the short and longer term.

While the Statehouse IT Director is confident that the digital communication needs (bandwidth and connectivity) of Vermont's media outlets can be met by the capacity of the building's current IT network, he freely admits that his department's expertise does not extend to the design and engineering of these A/V media systems and applications.

If done in the ideal sequence, the upgrade of the House Chamber to digital audio triggers a necessary set of design and planning steps that will ensure that the decisions and investments lay the groundwork the next phase of upgrades, supporting routing of audio/ video within the building and to the outside world.

While we realize there is an urgency to upgrade failing equipment in the House Chamber ASAP, we think it is prudent for an experienced audio/ video engineering firm to assess and plan for the needs of the House Chamber within the larger context of Statehouse A/V upgrades and capacity. This assessment and plan would create the roadmap for the building's routing, storage, signalling, physical points of interface, and overlay on current IT infrastructure--of which the House Chamber is one important part.

Here are some baseline recommendations to include in the work of an audio/ video engineering consultant with broadcast media experience:

- Assessment of media (audio and video) needs for Electronic News Gathering (ENG), gavel to gavel and interactive video coverage from the Statehouse; (a *preliminary* assessment will be provided to the Sgt at Arms by media outlets in the next two weeks, a more detailed assessment would, ideally, follow working with engineering consultant);
- Scope of Project: Identification of what is required for additional wiring, interfaces in different parts of the building, capacity of network server "core" to handle these high bandwidth needs, as well as low latency network requirements;
- Design of statehouse broadcast signal distribution network;
- Financial Estimates;
- Plan with Deliverables and Benchmarks and Timeline; and
- Identification of Project Leadership and Governance.

Here is some additional language, that places this work within the larger context of IT planning and decision making, as a way forward, for your consideration:

- Emergency sound system improvements in the House Chamber such replacement of microphone cable retractors may proceed as necessary during 2019.
- The Sergeant at Arms, in coordination with the Department of Buildings and General Services, shall develop a planning process and convene a steering committee including commercial and public media organizations and other stakeholders.
- The Sergeant at Arms with Department of Buildings and General services shall retain a project manager to coordinate on behalf of the General Assembly the completion of a detailed scope of work for all proposed systems referenced in the 2018 " K2 Assessment", and to develop those concepts further into designs, plans and construction drawings for the Statehouse information technology improvements including digital sound reinforcement, audio and video media access, quorum, roll call and emergency signalling, sound and video broadcast and/or recording and interactive teleconferencing for witness testimony and public hearings.
- Detailed designs and Plans developed shall be crafted to be implemented in stages over a period of three to five years and modular stages and budget requirements shall be presented to the Institutions Committees.
- A comprehensive Legislative Information Technology Plan shall be developed and completed in 2019 in accordance with 2 V.S.A. § 752 detailing the specific goals, strategies and priorities for all information technology projects anticipated over the next five years and recommendations for oversight and project management, including the potential need for any independent expertise to be retained for coordination, acoustic assessments and evaluation of proposed speakers and microphones, design, engineering, programming and management of proposed systems.
- The plan shall also identify operational management, access and privacy policy issues which may require discussion or action by others including House and Senate Rules Committees and Joint Rules Committee, and the policy implications of private or non-profit technology infrastructure investments in or supporting Statehouse media infrastructure or systems.

Thank you for your consideration. We are also happy to provide more information to the Committee upon request.

Media Organizations Key Contacts:

Tim Thayer, thayer@wcax.com

KC Fantoni, fantoni@wcax.com

Dana Nahumck, dnahumck@vermontpbs.org

Dave Rice, drice@vermontpbs.org

Jack Efromson, jefromson@vermontpbs.org

Frank Alwine, falwine@vpr.org

Rob Chapman, rob@orcamedia.net

Scott Campitelli, scott@campitellivt.com

Lauren-Glenn Davitian, davitian@cctv.org

Kevin Christopher/LCATV Colchester, kevin@lcatv.org