

Preserving State Government Digital Information Minnesota Partners Meeting



Minnesota Historical Society

Monday, January 28, 2008
Honeywell Commons, Minnesota History Center
St. Paul, Minnesota

In January 2008, the Minnesota Historical Society hosted the first partner meeting for its NDIIPP-sponsored project, Preserving State Government Digital Information. State partners from the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), Revisor's Office (RO), Legislative Reference Library (LRL), Legislative Coordinating Commission (LCC), House and Senate entities, as well as the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) met to discuss the project's goals and objectives.¹

The meeting was convened at 9:10 a.m.

After personal introductions were made, project director Bob Horton narrated a Powerpoint presentation, providing background on the Minnesota State Archives' recent digital records initiatives—including the Preserving the Records of the E-Legislature project—and summarizing the current project proposal. (Please refer to the Powerpoint presentation for further details.)

A couple salient points are highlighted here:

- 1) Beginning with the E-Legislature project and continuing with this one, sustainability is a primary objective. Conceptually, this means thinking more about an ongoing program and less about a finite project.*
- 2) Key constituencies (e.g., funding agents) are motivated by enhanced access to (rather than simple preservation of) digital content. But enhanced access, including aggregation and sharing of information, necessarily addresses preservation requirements.*

General discussion followed the presentation. The following account is paraphrased.

Wattson: The legislature has expressed interest in enhanced access to legislative history. Is there a plan to improve such a capability?

LaFleur: There's ongoing work to the legislative Web sites to provide greater interconnectivity and also to provide a uniform look. On Friday [Jan. 25] a group at the LRL (led by Paul

¹ See appendix 1 for a list of individuals present from each organization.

VanCura and including Elizabeth Lincoln) discussed possible improvements to its Web site to facilitate more thorough legislative history research.

Lincoln: As to legislative history research, it would be useful to determine what is easy and what is difficult and to address it accordingly.

Wattson: Jim Greenwalt has been working on archiving Senate minutes that have been made available online. [*According to the Minnesota Legislature's "Minnesota Legislative History Step by Step"*², as of 2007 only a few Senate committees are posting their minutes online; House Standing Committees Meeting Minutes have been posted since 2005]. This might be an opportunity to promote interconnectivity among all manner of digital data (e.g., minutes, committee reports, statutes, session laws, etc.).

LaFleur: Some Senate minutes are being made available online and will be saved long-term. MHS researchers can search for photos, newspapers, etc., in a relatively straightforward manner with little or no intervention. Researchers conducting legislative history, however, require so much more contextual information to make the data relevant that the act of providing links among existing electronic data has taken primacy over creating new electronic information.

Greenwalt: We need legislative leadership to buy into the preservation of content. It believes that it is not its problem, that someone else—LRL or MHS—will take care of it. LNET [Legislative Networking Group, who are information and systems staff from the legislature and who govern legislative Web content] has been trying to promote both content preservation and its standardized processing. There's a need for coordination and collaboration with the leadership. The nature and content of minutes, for example, can be different from committee to committee. How can we digitize all related content (e.g., PP presentations, audio/video components) that accompanies meeting minutes in a meaningful way?

Timmons: Political salability is a necessary and specific tactic because "preservation" connotes that content will be neither readily available nor useful, whereas "access" connotes relevancy. The RO is working on revamping its Web pages for access to content with links to complementary resources (e.g., statutes Web pages linking out to session laws, which themselves are being digitized but are not yet online).

Horton: How would we approach leadership? Where do we start? An open house at LRL?

Schweizer: We should have something concrete in mind, like committee records, so there's something tangible for them. We should also learn about their general concerns—like, for example, providing increased accessibility of records to the general public, and the potential dangers of using data taken out of context.

Greenberg: What are some real examples? What story is bringing this to life for people? What would a newspaper cover? We need concrete examples that people can relate to.

LaFleur: Maybe LRL could help with this.

Horton: Kansas, for example, is using the concept of e-democracy as a catalyst for the promotion of electronic data. [*In its 2004 strategic plan, the Kansas Legislative Information*

² <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/leghist/histstep.asp>

Services System group (K-LISS) listed among its assumptions that the “demand for e-government and ‘electronic democracy’ capability will continue to grow.”]

LaFleur: It’s possible to use legislative histories as a selling point. Also, the Library of Congress’ funding of state initiatives—including one lead by Minnesota—is another selling point to legislators. We need to do a strong appraisal of Minnesota’s and other states’ current electronic records initiatives. This project’s focus might be preserving records that have been created and supplement their preservation.

Horton: Where should our focus be? Older records? And where is the transition from current data to “older” data? What can we do to complement (rather than compete with) other state efforts? What will make things easier, or will ride on current efforts/priorities to feed sustainability? Sustainability means not adding to existing burdens but actually makes things easier.

LaFleur: A logical tactic would be to identify best practices among other states. We want this project to be really value-added.

Wattson: Remember that money is scarce, so what’s most practical? Some looking backwards is beneficial, yes, but looking forward and developing preservation plans for current data is also necessary.

Timmons: First, accuracy is a hot topic right now. Online legal resources must be authentic, and this is possible only through security (another major selling point to legislators). A second selling point is backup for disaster recovery (which is also another back door to preservation). A third selling point is legacy, as legislators ponder how their record of accomplishment will endure beyond their political terms.

Schweizer: We’re talking about making stuff more useful. Where? On the State’s Web site? On MHS’s? Others? Where will be the point of access?

Horton: Using Bush Foundation grant money, MHS has already purchased Autonomy Inc.’s IDOL software, which can search against a single repository or multiple repositories via a single search interface. MHS will launch its initial IDOL application within a month. It’s not proprietary to an institution, so it could be applied to the LCC, for example, with no MHS identification. But it does require a controlled vocabulary.

Dinger: But IDOL is not explicitly connected to this project right now?

Horton: It could be. The project has \$600,000 available to spend. This might be used on resources/staffing for existing or new efforts like LNET or other groups, for vendor consulting, for exploring Autonomy Inc., etc.

LaFleur: The State already has an in-house model similar to IDOL that powers its searching capability. [*The State of Minnesota’s Web portal (Minnesota North Star) uses a statewide enterprise search capability powered by the Verity Ultraseek search engine.*³]

Horton: IDOL can allow for single-state and multi-state use. Traditional library work is labor intensive, requiring processing on the item level. However, the massive amount of existing Web

³ <http://www.state.mn.us/portal/mn/jsp/content.do?programid=536903363&agency=NorthStar#search>

content precludes this kind of cataloging model. In essence, powerful search engines (e.g., IDOL and Google) take the place of highly structured cataloging. There is also growing momentum for users to provide content in addition to or in lieu of catalogers (i.e., annotation tools offered by retailers like amazon.com and Netflix, and Flickr accounts established by cultural heritage institutions like the Library of Congress).

We need to consider the expectations and needs of different user groups.

Break is held from 10:20 to 10:40 a.m.

Meeting resumes. Using Web access, Horton gives a brief overview of Flickr and the Library of Congress's (LoC) use of it, as well as MHS's Visual Resources Database and how IDOL might search against existing MHS databases. He considers how emerging technologies like Flickr (and users' changing expectations of electronic content) can inform IDOL's usefulness. [Beginning in January 2007, the Minnesota Digital Library has offered a wiki to capture the public's comments on item-level digital holdings.⁴]

Horton: How can we approach legislative leadership in the short term? An open house at the LRL? Is that a good idea? What would we do?

Wattson: What are you asking of legislators?

Horton: We would give them education on and promotion of this project. They may have areas of interest, priorities, or concerns. Or areas they simply want us to avoid.

Wattson: You'll need some brief paper summary to give them, a single page.

Greenwalt: You're not asking for money outright. But Senate and House resources will be used at some point so they should be invited.

Wattson: Legislative leadership doesn't ask for Web preservation yet benefits from those very initiatives (like LNET's contributions and legislative Web pages). Educating them about this process and its context could be a good first step.

LaFleur: We should flatter them, give them something for which they can take credit. Minnesota was specifically chosen by the LoC for this state-level initiative, and we should stress that national interest. We should also stress that we're in very early stages of this project's development.

Hubinger: There was legislation last session that legislative offices should coordinate with each other on IT issues. Perhaps archives could be folded in as well. Legislative leadership comes together at LCC meetings, which might make for an opportunity to speak with them.

Horton: This project ties in with other ongoing work. For instance, the legislature mandated a report from the Office of Enterprise Technology (OET) about Open Document Format. [*For further details, see Minnesota Laws 2007, Chapter 148, Article 2, Section 77.*] An initial report suggested a coherent preservation model was more important than Open Document Format.

⁴ <http://views.mndigital.org/>

Schweizer: I also think the LCC setting is a good idea. It provides a non-threatening opportunity to receive feedback as well as give information/promotion.

Wattson: Slideshows generally don't work well with LCC meetings, but this one may well work.

Hoffman: Are there any specific examples we could offer up to them, treating them as a unique and distinct user group?

Greenwalt: There are ongoing communications with them and news bits being pushed out to them.

Wattson: If we want a theme, then legislative history is something they can understand and appreciate.

Horton: What would any of you like to see come out of this project? What content? What tools? What do you want?

Greenwalt: Legislative staff is interested in research about current legislation, whereas others (e.g., historians) are interested in research for historical purposes.

Horton: Anything you want from other states?

Wattson: I wish other states' Web sites were as well organized as Minnesota's. Maybe we could propagate our best practices.

Schweizer: What does your search tool [IDOL?] need in terms of standards for cross-state use? That is, are there triggers that must be set before a state can contribute information?

Wattson: What about NCSL's 50-state single-search capability project?

Bourquard: That effort was problematic at best. We're now contracting with a vendor.

Horton: Keep in mind that we're not proposing technological solutions per se, but we're trying to figure out what we *want* to accomplish with this project.

LaFleur: At the LRL, people are excited about searching current legislation across many states, whereas historical research tends to be confined to Minnesota only. Also, academics are another user group to consider.

Horton: The academic community tends to have greater access to current technologies. They're more interested in research needs that can be met by access to massive amounts of data while less concerned with refined search capabilities. (This type of arrangement essentially means that the data content provider loses custody of the content.)

Timmons: We understand that Minnesota and California are lead partners. We are excited about bringing in historical content electronically to trace legislative history. What might California have to offer? Do they have similar needs? We should talk to them, comparing and contrasting our needs with theirs.

Rounds: California has active private vendors that are working on just this issue.

Horton: I believe California's referendum process includes, in effect, a surcharge that pays for these private vendors to create an electronic legislative history.

Timmons: California may have a model that may work for us, then.

Horton (*offering a recap*): Here are some next steps to take: 1) alert the Minnesota legislative leadership to our project; 2) provide project language for Greg Hubinger's report; 3) get on LCC's agenda; 4) create an overview stressing Minnesota's lead; 5) get a copy of the LRL report [?]; 6) coordinate with LNET (via LRL) on possibly using legislative history (content and possible linkages) as a demonstration project to determine what technical framework can support the intellectual framework; 7) plan an open house at LRL to initiate discussion with legislative leadership; 8) develop real-life examples as a selling point and communication tool; 8) coordinate with NCSL about cross-state work.

All reports, meeting notes, and supporting documentation will be posted on the project's Web site. We're not asking leadership for money but for their attention as a way to position the project down the road.

Wattson: What's the end product?

Horton (*referring to PP slide "Goals: MN and CA"*): LoC wants a demonstration project emphasizing access and use, an online site with some tools that will search against some specific content.

Wattson: Is the focus on Minnesota or California?

Horton: Minnesota.

Greenwalt: There are lots of non-digital records. Is there money available in this grant for digitizing?

Horton: LoC's grant to us is focused on capturing and managing born-digital content rather than digitizing paper records, even current ones like committee handouts.

Schweizer: If not for digitization per se, then is there money available for research to develop digitization models that can be used? [*He cites an example where a large digitization project failed to include an index, thereby rendering the end product effectively useless.*]

LaFleur: What about a possible demonstration project? For instance, creating the ideal or "perfect" legislative research site that ties together current and past information, plus a best practices guideline, plus the cost of preserving all related material (PP presentations, audio, video, etc.).

Horton: Yes, that may be valuable, especially if cost/benefit analysis is worked into it.

LaFleur: The Revisor's Office has a lot of experience in documenting the cost of migrating digital content.

McCormack: House Research is interested in a version of understanding legislative history, but more so when it's attached specifically to a policy cycle across states (e.g., declining emphasis on no-fault auto insurance). The RO and LRL have moved toward providing background

information toward this end. This is an opportunity to provide value-added content to legislative staff.

In my current work, I've learned there's a point in staff turnover rates where the loss of experience and institutional memory compromises my ability to provide effective research.

Horton: This would not be the final, definitive resource. You're talking about multiple existing resources (e.g., LRL and NCSL). We want to fit into an already existing structure to support and augment rather than duplicate prior accomplishments.

Wattson: There appears to be a clear trade-off: Minnesota finds itself in a position to build a better mousetrap versus explaining its current mousetrap to other states.

Horton: This project's intended scope was initially much larger: a \$4 million grant request became a \$600,000 grant. In light of this, the project focus necessarily re-shifted back to previous partners California and Minnesota.

Schweizer: We need a tangible case study or pilot project. What about using one type of legislative data (e.g., a single committee)? Oregon has documents online [*The Oregon State Archives' online legislative records include committee minutes (i.e., summary notes to recording tapes), bill tracings, and a guide to legislative records*⁵]. We should adopt a multi-strategy approach: look at both creation (legislation) and access (users) and offer up both research tools and specific examples of how to do it.

Horton: There are indeed two approaches. The first would be to come up with some lowest common denominator (e.g., IDOL) that can search against maximum content with minimum effort. The second is a high-end specificity, which may be a possible pilot project that includes cost/benefit analysis.

Does NCSL have any other thoughts?

Bourquord: Are there any legislative champions to go to bat for us?

Horton: No, none that we're aware of.

Bourquord: Legislators listen to constituents, other legislators, and lobbyists. Can we find one or all of these to champion this project?

LaFleur: Perhaps this is an opportunity to build advocates.

Greenberg: Sustainability is really key.

Greenwalt: This project has a 2-year time frame. We need to be structured and concrete. IT personnel work better in a structured environment, with clear timetables and milestones.

Horton: I understand this, and our project team (Rounds and Jones) is working on just that point. A list of project tasks already exists but needs to be updated. It will be made available online. The project will also use the Basecamp software to foster and document communication.

⁵ <http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/banners/legis.htm>

Rounds: We'll also provide the turn-around document for this meeting.

Timmons: What's this project's content? We'll need to decide this in relatively short order. I also think an LNET meeting has to happen very, very soon.

Wattson: There's no mention of a records retention schedule in the project proposal. What is to be saved, discarded? [*LNET has a legislative Web site retention policy⁶, but "Materials which populate the legislative Web site are considered unofficial documents and as such are not subject to Minnesota Statute 15.17.*]

Horton: As for structure, we anticipate some form of a lowest-common-denominator search, using IDOL, within 1 year, and then moving toward more specificity.

Wattson: The program will need deadlines and also some accounting of the time impact on the Minnesota partners.

Horton: Yes, true, but the bulk of the work will fall on the MHS project staff.

Partners voiced a general consensus that this is a worthwhile grant.

The next LNET meeting—which occurs about every 4 weeks—is Thursday, Jan. 31. It was suggested, however, that a presentation on the NDIIPP project be added to LNET's agenda sometime after January.

Meeting concluded at 11:55 a.m.

⁶ <http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/retention.asp>

Appendix 1
Meeting Participants

Minnesota Historical Society: Nancy Hoffman, Bob Horton, Jennifer Jones, David Kelliher, Charles Rodgers, Shawn Rounds, Christopher Welter

Minnesota House Budget & Accounting: Paul Schweizer

Minnesota House Research: Patrick McCormack (arrived at 11 a.m.)

Minnesota Legislative Coordinating Commission: Greg Hubinger

Minnesota Legislative Reference Library: Julie Dinger, Robbie LaFleur, Elizabeth Lincoln

Minnesota Revisor's Office: Michele Timmons

Minnesota Senate Counsel & Research: Peter Wattson, Joan White

Minnesota Senate Information Systems: Jim Greenwalt

National Conference of State Legislatures: Jo Anne Bourquard, Pam Greenberg