

Slowly But Surely, Legislature Opening Its Doors

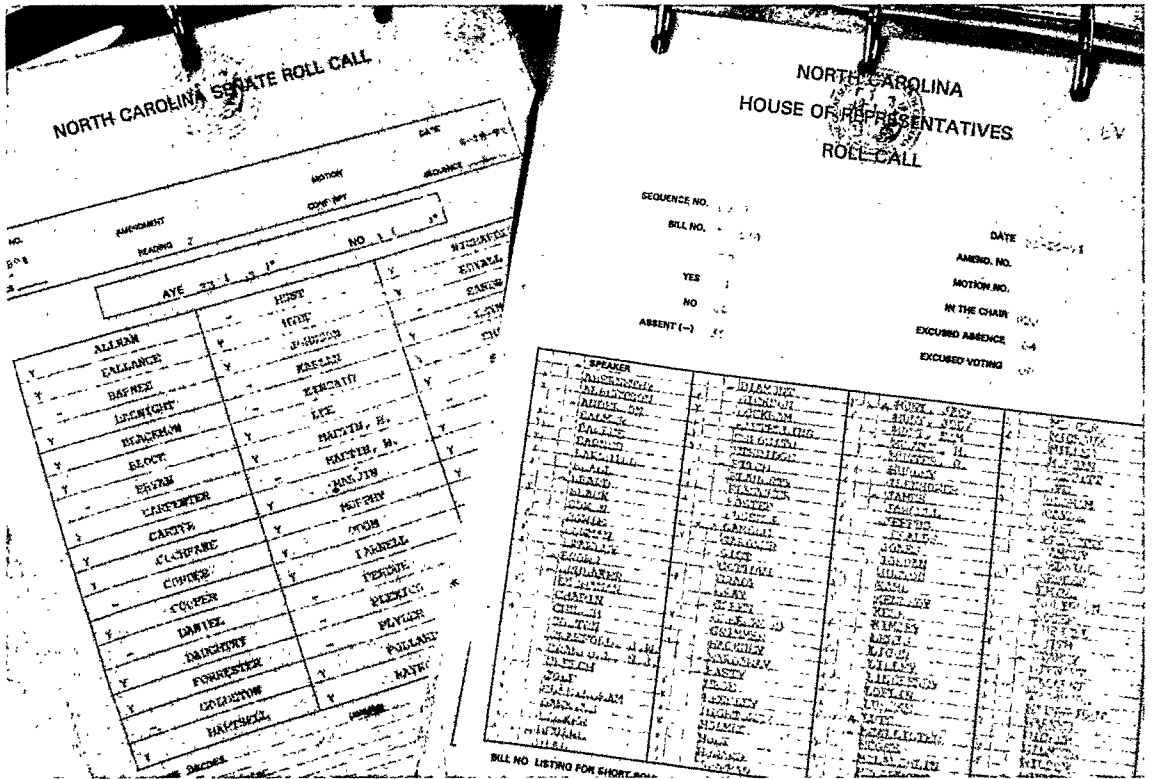
State lawmakers are moving toward publishing their votes from the General Assembly—a goal long advocated by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. That, coupled with a plan to broadcast legislative sessions on cable television, could go a long way toward opening the assembly's doors to the public.

Legislators are taking a hard look at publishing their votes as part of a plan to revamp the computerized vote-recording systems used in the House and the Senate. The Legislative Services Commission, a bipartisan panel that directs the legislative staff, voted in March 1992 to replace the electronic voting systems—which are 15 years

old and frequently break down. House Speaker Dan Blue (D-Wake), in response to a letter from Center Director Ran Coble, said lawmakers will use that project as an opportunity to increase public access to voting records and the assembly's computerized bill-status system.

"The North Carolina House of Representatives is currently revising its computer system to allow the electronic storage and retrieval of votes...." Blue wrote in a Dec. 12, 1991, letter to Coble. "At this time I cannot ensure that this will be completed in time for the 1992 short session, but I do anticipate the completion of this effort in time for the 1993 long session. I believe that this

Researching legislative votes can be a time-consuming process, as shown by these roll calls—which provide no explanations beyond bill numbers and vote tallies.





“DEMOCRACY REQUIRES OPEN ACCESS BY THE PUBLIC. THIS IS A SMALL PRICE TO PAY TO GIVE NORTH CAROLINIANS FIRSTHAND ACCESS TO THE DEBATE AND DELIBERATIONS OF REPRESENTATIVES IN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY.”

— REP. JUDY F. HUNT (D-WATAUGA),
COMMENTING ON THE PROPOSAL TO TELECAST
LIVE, GAVEL-TO-GAVEL COVERAGE OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY.

system will address most of the needs outlined in your request.”

In letters dated Nov. 12, 1991, Coble urged Blue and Senate President Pro Tem Henson P. Barnes (D-Wayne) to improve public access to legislative votes by taking advantage of available computer technology. On behalf of the Center’s board of directors, Coble specifically asked the legislature to:

- Obtain the computer software needed to record, store, retrieve, and *publish* all votes taken in the House and the Senate;
- Expand the current bill-status system with remote terminals outside the legislative building, so that citizens could access such information using computers, modems, and other call-in technology.

Researching Votes Is A Long And Winding Road

If legislators follow through with Coble’s pro-

posal, it would culminate a long, hard-fought struggle by the Center, which for years has urged the General Assembly to make voting records more easily accessible. In principle, legislative votes are public records. But in reality, the recording system is so complex that researching even a single vote can be extremely difficult.¹ As an editorial in *The News & Observer* of Raleigh described it, “Trying to thread one’s way through that maze can lead to hair-pulling frustration long before it leads to accurate voting records. . . . The result, obviously, is to shield legislators from full accountability to the public.”²

The Center itself shouldered that task for more than three years. For part of 1981 and all of 1982, 1983 and 1984, the Center recorded and published the votes of all 170 legislators on all public bills. During that period, the service published the results of more than 4,000 recorded votes—drawing widespread editorial praise from newspapers across the state. But the Center halted the project after the 1984 session because of high costs and the lack

of paying subscribers to the service. The cost of staffing the Center's vote project in 1983 alone ran to \$45,932—far more than the nonprofit organization was able to generate in subscription fees.

For years, one of the key opponents of vote publication was former House Speaker Liston B. Ramsey, who maintained that it would cost too much money. Ramsey also opposed computerized vote storage, fearing that computer hackers could enter the system and tamper with records. Both Blue and Barnes, however, support the change to computer tabulation. The new electronic-voting system, which will cost \$140,000 to install, will allow floor votes to be stored in a computer data base. But several questions remain:

- Will the legislature *print the votes in a publication* or just make them available in the legislative library, as is done now?
- Will any publication of votes include a *description* of what the votes are about?
- Will the public be allowed to access the vote database using computers outside the legislature?

Tune In For More Details

The legislature is taking other steps, as well, to open its doors to the public. In April, the Open Government Through Public Telecommunication Study Commission recommended that the legislature provide gavel-to-gavel coverage of House and Senate proceedings—similar to what C-SPAN does for the U.S. Congress. Coverage would be provided by the Agency for Public Telecommunications, a division of the state Department of Administration. Although the proposal failed to pass during the 1992 session, the issue is certain to return during future sessions.

Under the study commission's proposal, the telecast would be carried live by cable television systems across the state, with excerpts edited for inclusion in the news programs of commercial radio and television stations. Public schools and community colleges also could receive the telecasts via satellite dishes. To pay for the program, the commission recommended allocating: \$2.4 million for installing television equipment in the House and Senate chambers; \$314,000 to match a federal grant for equipping one public library in each county with a satellite dish; and \$500,000 in

additional operating funds to the Agency for Public Telecommunications, which would produce and distribute the show.

"Democracy requires open access by the public," Rep. Judy F. Hunt (D-Watauga), who chairs the study commission, said in a statement. "This is a small price to pay to give North Carolinians firsthand access to the debate and deliberations of the representatives in the General Assembly."

Commission members say that live coverage could begin as early as mid-1993. The big question is: Will viewers tune in? Some newspaper editors think so. Comparing the proposal to the Agency for Public Telecommunications' current programming, called OPEN/NET, an editorial in *The Charlotte Observer* stated: "Nobody knew whether anyone would watch it, but it has worked splendidly for eight years. Now it's time for the General Assembly to provide the money to make (OPEN/NET) more of a full-time link between the state's 6.6 million citizens and their government."³

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹For more on researching legislative votes, see Paul T. O'Connor, "So You Think It's Easy To Find Out How Legislators Voted, Eh?" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (June 1988), pp. 45-50.

²"Tracks through a voting maze," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., June 16, 1988, editorial page.

³Quoted from the editorial, "Expand Open/net," *The Charlotte Observer*, March 29, 1992, p. 2C.

In principle, legislative votes are public records. But in reality, the recording system is so complex that researching even a single vote can be extremely difficult.
