



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

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CENTER SAYS LEGISLATURE SHOULD START FULL-TIME TV COVERAGE

The General Assembly should televise its sessions from beginning to end, as well as bolster the public television network's existing legislative news coverage, according to a nonprofit research group that studies state government.

The North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, in the February edition of its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight, says that more thorough television coverage of the state legislature ultimately would lead to closer ties between elected officials and citizens.

"Televising legislative sessions is another vital step in the effort to open state government's doors to the public," says Ran Coble, the Center's executive director. "Such coverage would foster greater public understanding of how elected officials make decisions and how they spend tax dollars. It also would make elected officials more accountable -- at a time when commercial television news programs are increasingly abandoning the legislature."

The Center's recommendations are part of a package of Insight articles on televising state government. Adam Hochberg, a broadcast journalist who covers state government for public radio stations in North Carolina, was the principal author.

The Center's analysis focuses on a proposal to begin "gavel-to-gavel" television coverage of the legislature -- that is, to telecast House and Senate sessions on cable TV from opening to closing gavels. The articles also look at legislative TV coverage in other states.

Other States Televise Legislative Sessions

In its research, the Center found that five states currently provide gavel-to-gavel TV coverage and that two other states have discontinued such programming because of budgetary constraints. The cost in every state was less than \$1 million per year. Some states also broadcast governors' press conferences, supreme court proceedings, and state board meetings.

What It Would Cost

The gavel-to-gavel proposal was recommended by the Open Government Through Public Telecommunications Study Commission, a legislative panel reporting to the 1992 General Assembly. The commission projected an initial start-up cost of about \$3.2 million, with ongoing expenses of about \$500,000 a year.

Last year, the Senate Appropriations Committee decided not to fund the project because of budget constraints in the 1991-92 legislature, which faced a \$1.2 billion deficit. More recently, the Government Performance Audit Commission, a panel charged with improving efficiency in state government, has recommended delaying the proposal pending further study. But a key supporter, Rep. George W. Miller Jr. (D-Durham), says he plans to re-submit the funding request this year.

Arguments For And Against

"The public is demanding to know more about their government," says Miller, a 12-term representative who notes that newspapers and commercial television stations have scaled back their coverage of the legislature in recent years. "Currently, the public has to rely only upon what is reported through the press, many times sporadically, most of the time after the fact."

Under the proposal, the Agency for Public Telecommunications would televise House and Senate floor deliberations daily during sessions, distributing the coverage on cable television systems across the state. The agency also would install satellite receiving dishes at 100 public libraries statewide, so people without cable TV could watch the legislative coverage at their local libraries.

"It gives people a complete picture of what happens on the floor of the House and Senate," says Lee Wing, executive director of the Agency for Public Telecommunications. "People who know more about their government will vote more intelligently, and government will improve as a result of it."

Some legislators, however, question whether the gavel-to-gavel plan is the best way to improve news coverage of the General Assembly. Sen. David Parnell (D-Robeson) says the program would duplicate coverage already provided by the UNC Center for Public Television -- which hasn't received the funding needed to broadcast its programming across the entire state. "Before we start spending state dollars to cover the work of the legislature, we ought to spend the dollars so that our people would be able to receive the service that's going out of the [UNC] stations now," Parnell says.

Other lawmakers call the proposal a questionable use of public money at a time when the state is trying to prune expenditures, not expand them. "I have not heard any hue and cry from anybody wanting to see us on television," says Sen. Beverly Perdue (D-Craven). "I'd much prefer to see that money go to buy

a few school buses for our children. They need that more than they need to see us."

Despite such concerns, some of the strongest support for the gavel-to-gavel proposal has come from the news media. Richard Oppel, editor of *The Charlotte Observer*, says the cablecasts would let journalists monitor the legislature on TV. The program also would be useful to reporters who cover education or other issues but don't regularly cover the legislature. "... I would see the gavel-to-gavel providing the opportunity for a reporter to tune in from back in Charlotte," Oppel says. "He or she may not necessarily have to get in a car and drive to Raleigh."

News Media Reducing Legislative Coverage

A number of newspapers and commercial television stations have cut back their legislative coverage in recent years because of the expense of maintaining Raleigh bureaus. Newspapers that have scaled back their capital bureaus include the *Herald-Sun* of Durham, the *News & Record* of Greensboro, and *The Virginian Pilot* of Norfolk, Va. Daily papers that currently have full-time capital correspondents are the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, *The Charlotte Observer*, the *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, the *Gaston Gazette*, the *Herald-Sun*, the *News & Record*, *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, and the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

The UNC Center for Public Television provides the only full-time TV coverage of the legislature, with its "Stateline: Legislative Report" program. Among the commercial TV stations, only WTVD in Durham and WECT in Wilmington regularly assign reporters to cover legislative news. WBTB in Charlotte and WNCT in Greenville have closed their Raleigh bureaus in recent years, and WRAL in Raleigh has gone without a regular state government reporter since 1991. The only radio stations with full-time correspondents are WUNC in Chapel Hill and WPTF in Raleigh.

Several news services also provide regular legislative coverage for member newspapers, and radio and television stations. Such groups include The Associated Press, the Capitol Press Association, the New York Times Regional Newspaper Group, and the North Carolina [Radio] News Network. Also, the N.C. State Government News Service recently began publishing "The Insider," a daily newsletter that it FAXes to subscribers.

Coble, the executive director of the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, says the benefits from the gavel-to-gavel coverage outweigh the potential concerns. "After an initial outlay for equipment," he says, "citizens can get gavel-to-gavel coverage for about half-a-million dollars a year, which is a very reasonable expenditure for more open coverage of the legislature. And the success of C-SPAN at the national level should reassure us that there's interest at the state level."

A Related Proposal To Make Public TV Available Statewide

Coble insists, however, that funding the proposal must not

come at the expense of plans to expand existing legislative news coverage by the UNC Center for Public Television to all areas of the state. The legislature has cut funding for public television by 8.3 percent over the past two fiscal years, while failing to allocate the money needed to broadcast its programming to the entire state. Public TV broadcasts still do not reach much of southeastern North Carolina. Plus, reception is poor in many parts of the mountains as well as the outer fringes of the network's broadcast signals -- even in highly populated areas such as Raleigh.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research recommends that legislators appropriate the funds needed for the UNC Center for Public Television to broadcast its programming throughout North Carolina and boost its signals in areas where reception is poor. It would cost \$12 million to install the towers, antennae, and other equipment needed to extend its broadcasting to the southeastern part of the state, with new transmitters near Lumberton and Rockingham, according to the UNC Center. Also, at least two of the public TV network's 10 broadcast stations need equipment upgrades to improve reception. Improvements needed at WUNC in Chapel Hill and WUNL in Winston-Salem have an estimated price tag of \$10 million.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit corporation created to evaluate state government programs and to study public policy issues facing North Carolina. The Center receives general operating support from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations, 108 corporate contributors, and about 800 individual and organizational members.

In addition to publishing North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center has conducted studies on a variety of issues, including state regulation of nursing homes, ways to increase voter participation, and disparities in funding between rich and poor school districts. The Center also publishes a citizen's guide to the legislature, rankings of legislators' effectiveness, and rankings of the most influential lobbyists.

Copies of the February issue of Insight magazine containing the articles on television coverage of state government can be obtained from the Center for \$6.36 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling. To order, call (919) 832-2839, or write to the N.C. Center, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, N.C. 27602.

For more information, call Insight associate editor Tom Mather at the Center at (919) 832-2839.

**Table 1. Existing Public Television Coverage of
North Carolina State Government**

Program	Producer	Duration / Frequency	Availability	Description
"Legislative Report"	UNC Center for Public Television	30 minutes, 3 days a week during legislative sessions	Statewide on public television channels	Taped interviews with news clips and discussion.
"North Carolina This Week"	UNC Center for Public Television	30 minutes, weekly	Statewide on public television channels	Journalist roundtable, often focusing on legislative issues.
"OPEN/net"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	2 hours, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Unedited coverage of legislative and executive branch meetings, followed by live call-in show.
"Inside North Carolina"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	1 hour, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Live call-in show on public issues of statewide interest.
"State to State"	Agency for Public Telecommunications	1 hour, weekly	Statewide on about 50 cable TV systems	Live call-in show on public issues of state and national interest.
(title varies)	UNC Center for Public Television and N.C. Center for Public Policy Research	1/2-hour to 1 hour, broadcast once or twice yearly	Statewide on public television channels	Documentaries on various public issues such as solid waste, rewarding good teaching, poverty, health care.
"Town Hall Television"	Town Hall Television Inc.	1 hour, monthly (planned)	Statewide on public television channels	Varied format show on public issues of state-wide interest.

Table 2. Gavel-to-Gavel Television Coverage in Other States

State¹	Producer	Duration	Annual Budget	Funding Source	Distribution	Coverage
California	The California Channel and the California state legislature	1991-present	\$900,000	Private	Viewers in 60 percent of cable TV systems in state	State legislature, governor's press conferences, state supreme court, selected state boards
Massachusetts	WGBH Public Television	1984-present	\$425,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Boston and eastern half of state	State House only
Minnesota	Senate Media Services	1988-present	\$650,000 ²	Public	Cable TV systems in Minneapolis/ St. Paul metro area	State Senate only
Nebraska	Nebraska Public Television	1982-present	\$100,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Lincoln and Omaha metro areas	State legislature (unicameral body)
New York	New York Cable Television Commission	1984-92 (discontinued)	\$500,000	Public	Cable TV systems in Albany metro area	State legislature, court of appeals, some board meetings
Oregon	Legislative Media Services	1989 (discontinued)	NA ³	Public/Private	Cable TV systems in Portland metro area	State legislature, some board meetings and press conferences
Rhode Island	Capitol Television	1986-present	\$500,000	Public	Cable TV systems and commercial radio and TV stations statewide	State legislature, some board meetings, press conferences, and special programs

¹ California, Massachusetts, and New York have full-time legislatures; the remainder are part-time bodies.

² Minnesota budget includes funding for a half-hour, edited news program.

³ Oregon coverage was done on a trial basis for three months in a cooperative effort involving the state legislature, Oregon Public Broadcasting, a private telephone company, and three cable TV systems. No special appropriations or grants were involved.