

Where you live need not limit your access to legislators

By Wayne Hoffman

When a new state government parking garage opened north of the Statehouse recently, Boise Sen. Chuck Winder declared the project "the last piece of the puzzle in that effort to make the Capitol building more accessible."

I hope that is not really the case. If you live in the Boise area, perhaps the fact that the parking garage makes new parking spaces available to state employees and legislators is helpful because, supposedly, streetside spaces will be freed for public use during the legislative session. We shall see if that really is true.

But if you live in Sandpoint, Challis, Rexburg, Malta or any of dozens of other far-flung Idaho towns and hamlets, it is very difficult to testify on important matters that affect every aspect of our lives. And "very difficult" quickly becomes "nearly impossible" when the snow begins to fall. In the 21st century, where you live need not impact your access to the legislative process.

With all due respect to Sen. Winder, the last piece of the puzzle of making the Statehouse more accessible should be the addition of remote testimony for people who simply can't make their way to Boise once, let alone multiple times, to exercise their right to advise their legislators on bills.

Yes, people can still call and email lawmakers, but urban Idaho has a disproportionate say in legislative affairs just because of proximity. It is important for legislators to be able to hear and see their constituents, to exchange ideas, ask questions, get answers and understand the impact of legislation on real people, real businesses, real communities. That's a flavor that can't be added with an occasional email.

Washington state legislators recently added the ability to do remote testimony, something my friends at the Washington Policy Center championed, and welcomed the new era of openness saying, "For decades, those living long distances from the Capitol have had to brave icy conditions, closed passes or expensive flights to participate in the legislative process. Now, with this exciting new development, we hope that remote testimony will expand to other cities during the legislative session, providing all citizens in our state the opportunity to participate in the legislative process."

I remember in the early 2000s when the Legislature added cameras to the House and Senate chambers. Back then, if you had a suitable Internet connection, you could watch grainy images of tiny legislators. Faces were indistinguishable. Later, lawmakers added new cameras and equipment to capture quality video from floor debates and transmit audio from all committee rooms and video from some.

Then in 2013, the Legislature, after much prodding from us, agreed to stop deleting the videos of floor debates and create a permanent film archive available via the web.

The technology already exists to invite people to debate bills and issues from throughout the state on an ongoing basis. Washington is using its community college

system. There are 44 counties, 115 school districts, a multitude of digital platforms available to bring the Idaho Legislature home to the people, and the people home to the Legislature.

This is the natural next step in an ongoing effort to make Idaho government more accessible and transparent.