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Amy Schauer Nelson, Bismarck, column: N.D. must open up Legislature
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By Amy Schauer Nelson

BISMARCK — As the 2009 North Dakota legislative session approaches, I am concerned about the lack of access to state government that our “Citizen Legislature” will have.

Although the North Dakota Legislature and the Legislative Council in the most recent session began posting live audio and video of House and Senate floor sessions on the Legislature’s Web site (in contrast with previous sessions, where it was limited to alternating weeks or only via television), it does not appear any additional access will occur in the upcoming session.

When will the Legislature and the legislative Web site start posting committee hearings audio live online? Why not also archive and post floor session and committee hearing audio? Anyone who attended a committee hearing in the 2007 session saw the clerks keeping digital audio of the committee hearings, so one would think it’d be available for online upload for archiving at the very least. Floor sessions already are recorded and posted live on the Web, so archiving also should be available.

The South Dakota Legislature posts both live and archived versions of its floor debate and committee hearings, with South Dakota Public Broadcasting providing the live feeds. With them, the South Dakota legislative Web site then archives and posts the floor sessions as well as the committee hearing archived links on the individual bill pages.

So, not only can people listen to committee hearings and floor debate live, but they can go back and listen to yesterday’s, last week’s, last month’s or last session’s committee hearings and floor sessions any time they want — 24 hours a day from their home, work or anywhere with an Internet connection. In fact, you can go back to 2001 in South Dakota and listen to archived audio.

Minnesota does it as well. There, citizens even can go as far back as 1998 and listen to floor debate or committee hearings on certain bills on their state’s legislative site. Montana? They do it, too. People can go to their Legislature’s Web site and listen to live and archived floor session and committee hearings as well as the interim session committee work.

Why can all the states around us provide this access, but North Dakota cannot?

This access would help our North Dakota citizen Legislature tremendously. For North Dakotans who live away from the capital city and are unable to travel to Bismarck to take part, for those who have jobs where they can’t take time off to attend the legislative session, for those with limited access to transportation, for those weather issues that always occur that restrict travel and for those who want to catch up on what their state is doing to better their lives after they’ve put the kids to bed at night, this would be an incredible chance for them to remain involved in our legislative process and for North Dakota to have a true “Citizen Legislature.”

Nelson is executive director of the Fair Housing of the Dakotas.