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Thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts about government transparency and accountability.

For years, the long-standing joke in Albany was if you want to know what's happening at the Capitol, ask an elevator operator. Now that the elevators have been automated, we're <u>really</u> in the dark.

Just as the elevators were finally brought up to date, the Senate needs to update its own channels of communication--tapping the power of the Internet to make government information easily accessible to citizens from Riverhead to Buffalo, as well as those in the Capitol building itself.

The new rules adopted by this house last month promise that the majority leader, "to the extent practicable," will make use of the Internet "to provide access to the public policy debates, decision-making process and legislative records of the Senate."

The need to make fuller use of the Internet was documented in the most recent Brennan Center report, which accurately described the Senate and Assembly web sites as poorly organized and containing few products of the lawmaking process.

If you doubt about that assessment, surf the 'net yourself. On the Senate web site, you'll find coloring book for kids, but no record of votes by members of the Senate Education Committee. In fact, there are few written reports of any kind – and none from committees, except Finance.

Although all Senate floor debates and hearing testimony are transcribed for posterity, you won't find transcripts on the web. You can watch Senate sessions live on the Internet—unless it's the Assembly's turn to go live. Then sessions are delayed. Debates are not archived, which means citizens with daytime jobs can't view them.

On the Senate site, you can track a current bill --<u>if</u> you know the bill number. Otherwise, bill searches are frustrating, if not impossible—unless you subscribe to the Legislative Retrieval System, which is free for legislators and costs $2,000 annually for everyone else.

Conspicuously missing from the Senate web site are legislative member items and office expenditures by individual legislators. Both are public information under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).

Last year, the Attorney General posted member items in a searchable database on his Project Sunlight website. In July, the Empire Center unveiled its transparency website, www.SeeThroughNY.net, including member items and a searchable database of the Senate and Assembly expenditures that are now made available only in print form.

One reason we did this was to show you it <u>can</u> be done.

With the New York facing a $13 billion budget gap, the Legislature should involve all interested citizens—not just those who can hire lobbyists in Albany—in debating policy choices that will affect government services and taxes for years to come.

Here are a few guidelines for the enhancing the transparency of the Senate:

- Use the Senate web site to provide information about policy issues, including background data and statistics, hearings testimony, legislative reports, member briefing memoranda.
- Ensure information is provided on a "real time" basis, so citizens can have their voices heard before bills become laws.
- Information should be in searchable formats. It should be written in clear language understandable to those who are not Albany insiders.
- Never underestimate the potential wonkiness of the public (as the viewership of C-SPAN demonstrates). Let the public decide what they want to see, not politicians. The state Senate, equipped with automated video cameras in its chamber, should make its debates available 24-7 on the web.
- Adopt a Senate policy of "pro-active disclosure" regarding public records. As described by the Committee on Open Government, this would require "agencies to post records on their websites that are clearly public and frequently requested when an agency has the ability to do so without undue burden or cost."
- In addition, the Legislature also should pass a "pro-active disclosure" law affecting all state agencies and local governments, as well as the Legislature itself. This is no pipe dream. It's done in Mexico where federal agencies are required by law to post budgets, employee salaries, contracts, grant, licenses and permits on the Internet. If it can be done in Mexico, why not in New York?

While transparency is a buzz word in political circles today, it's not a new concept. Thomas Jefferson once observed that "Information is the currency of democracy." Two centuries later, another president, Barack Obama, is calling for "creating an unprecedented level of openness in government." The Senate should formally pursue the same goal.

Thank you.