

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1761

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government & Tribal Affairs

Title: An act relating to the ethical use of legislative web sites.

Brief Description: Addressing the ethical use of legislative web sites.

Sponsors: Representatives Hasegawa, Appleton and Hurst.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Affairs: 2/3/09, 2/20/09 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Authorizes the maintenance of official legislative websites without alteration throughout the year, regardless of pending elections.
- Creates an exception to the State Ethics Law to allow internet links on official legislative websites to non-legislative websites and materials.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Hunt, Chair; Appleton, Vice Chair; Armstrong, Ranking Minority Member; Alexander, Flannigan, Hurst and Miloscia.

Staff: Tracey O'Brien (786-7196)

Background:

State ethics laws and legislative ethics rules prohibit the use of any person, money, or property under a legislator's official control or direction or his or her official custody for the private benefit or gain of the legislator. However, there are exceptions to this prohibition and the Legislative Ethics Board (Board) has general rules interpreting the exceptions. For example, if there is no actual cost to the state or the cost is de minimis, if there is a public benefit, and if the use does not interfere with the performance of official duties, then infrequent and incidental use of state resources for private benefit may be permissible.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

In addition, a legislator may not use or authorize the use of state facilities, directly or indirectly, for the purpose of assisting a campaign for election of a person to office or for the promotion of or opposition to a ballot proposition. Knowing acquiescence by a legislator with the authority to direct, control, or influence the actions of the state officer or state employee using the public resources constitutes a violation. Facilities of an agency can include stationery, office space, publications, and use of state employees. Among the exceptions to this prohibition: a legislator may use state facilities for activities that are part of the normal and regular conduct of the office; and he or she may have de minimis use of public facilities incidental to the preparation or delivery of communications.

Recent Board Complaint Opinions have held that a “legislator’s use of legislative press releases, prepared with the facilities of the House of Representatives or of the Senate, through the posting of those releases on a legislator’s campaign website constitutes a use of the facilities of an agency (public resources) in support of his or her campaign in violation of RCW 42.52.180.”

Summary of Substitute Bill:

An exception to the prohibition against the use of public facilities of an agency, directly or indirectly, for the purpose of assisting a campaign for the election of a person to an office or for the promotion of or opposition to a ballot proposition is added. Official legislative websites can be maintained, unaltered, throughout the year, regardless of pending elections. The websites can contain any discretionary material which was also specifically prepared for the legislator in the course of his or her duties as a legislator. This includes newsletters and press releases. These materials shall not be considered "campaign materials" and be subject to election year restrictions. However, the website shall not be used for campaign purposes. The websites cannot be altered after June 30 of an election year for legislators seeking re-election.

Legislators may establish links to non-legislative websites on their official legislative website. A legislator or legislative employee shall not be held responsible under the state ethics laws for the non-legislative material found on the non-legislative website in cases where the links are established from their official legislative website. However, an official legislative website cannot link to a website paid for by a candidate or a political committee.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill allows legislators to establish links to non-legislative websites on their official legislative website. A legislator or legislative employee shall not be held responsible under the state ethics laws for the non-legislative material found on the non-legislative website in cases where the links are established from their official legislative website. However, an official legislative website cannot link to a website paid for by a candidate or a political committee.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) State law protects against abuses of public resources, but sometimes the rules get behind the times and expectations. House members have information posted on their legislative websites that the public has come to rely on. But, for half the term, this same useful information must be removed for the websites. This makes legislative work and the Legislature less transparent to constituents. Although this bill will keep the information that constituents need, it still prevents the use of the websites for campaign purposes.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Hasegawa, prime sponsor.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.