

17th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures

Report on the Introduction
of Electronic Petitions in the
Legislative Assembly of the
Northwest Territories

Chair: Mr. Bob Bromley, MLA

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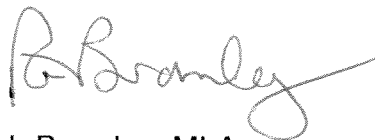
Marina Devine
Committee Researcher

June 14, 2012

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures is pleased to provide its Report on the Introduction of Electronic Petitions in the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories and commends it to the House.



Bob Bromley, MLA
Chairperson

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
RULES AND PROCEDURES**

**REPORT ON THE INTRODUCTION
OF ELECTRONIC PETITIONS
IN THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

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INTRODUCTION

Petitions are formal requests submitted to a legislature. They are a vehicle for the public to influence policy-making and legislation and to bring their concerns to the attention of the Assembly. The act of petitioning has been described as the oldest of parliamentary forms. Citizens have used them for hundreds of years in the western Parliamentary tradition to state their grievances and ask their Government for help. Today, many jurisdictions permit electronic as well as handwritten petitions to be presented in their legislatures.

On June 4, 2009, the Legislative Assembly directed the Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures to undertake research to determine the consequences of allowing the use of electronic petitions in the Northwest Territories. The Assembly further requested that the Committee pay particular attention to concerns regarding security of the petition site and the authenticity of on-line signatures.

The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures examined issues related to technology, implementation and costs. The Committee looked to other jurisdictions with online petition sites, particularly the parliaments of Quebec, Victoria, Queensland, and Tasmania in Australia, and the Scottish Parliament.

In Committee Report 1-16(6), the Standing Committee recommended the implementation of an electronic petition pilot project to enhance the traditional petition system currently in place. On May 20, 2010, the Legislative Assembly adopted a motion to implement an electronic petition pilot project, to run from October 1, 2010 to June 30, 2011. A second motion further recommended that the Office of the Clerk undertake an evaluation of the project at completion and that the evaluation be provided to the 17th Legislative Assembly.

The present report presents the results of this evaluation and makes recommendations for the future.

ELECTRONIC PETITION PILOT PROJECT GUIDELINES

The following guidelines were established for the pilot project.

1. The Assembly would maintain the current process of paper petitions.
2. Electronic petitions could be used on their own or could be combined with a traditional paper petition.
3. The electronic petitions website would resemble the Assembly website as closely as possible.
4. The Assembly would review and approve the format of an electronic petition before it was posted online.
5. An acceptable petition must contain a proper and respectful request of the NWT Government or Minister to take, or refrain from taking, some action in response to an alleged grievance.
6. Aside from the petition format identified above, Assembly staff would not comment on, verify or amend any information in the body of the petition.
7. As with traditional petitions, electronic petitions require that a Member present the petition to the House.

These guidelines created as much uniformity as possible between the rules and procedures already established for written petitions and the use electronic petitions.

CONDITIONS OF USE

The following conditions governing the use of the electronic petitions website were prominently displayed on the site.

1. A person may only join a petition once.
2. A petitioner must not use a false name
3. A petition must be submitted in good faith.
4. A petition must not contain potentially libelous, false or defamatory statements.
5. A petition must not contain matters protected by a court order, subject to an appeal process or legal actions.
6. A petition must not contain material which is commercially sensitive, confidential or which may cause personal distress or loss.
7. A petition must not contain names of individual officials of public bodies.
8. A petition must not contain the names of individuals, or provide information which will easily identify an individual, in relation to criminal accusations.

SECURITY AND PRIVACY

The following security measures were implemented on the on-line petition site.

1. A petitioner must register on the site by creating a user name and password.
2. A petitioner must supply an address, email address, town, postal code and country.
3. A petitioner's name and community were the only personal information available to the public when viewing an electronic petition.
4. Email confirmation was sent to the principal petitioner to advise that the petition was posted and ready to accept signatures.
5. A limited number of entries for each internet address was permitted.
6. Electronic signatures were reviewed in order to eliminate obviously false names and multiple entries.
7. For the purposes of presentation in the House, the number of electronic signatures from the Northwest Territories must be clearly identified.

STATISTICS

The pilot project was implemented in October 2010 and ran until June 30, 2011. Year over year comparisons show that there is some modest demand for the online petition format in the Northwest Territories.

- In 2007-2008, there were 10 paper petitions.
- In 2008-2009, there were nine paper petitions.
- In 2009-2010, there were again nine paper petitions.
- In 2010-2011, when the electronic petition project was implemented, ten petitions were submitted, of which half were electronic. Two of these were combined with the traditional paper format.
- In 2010-2011, there were a total of 2,869 signatures gathered on petitions, just over one third of which were electronic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In a jurisdiction so large and geographically remote, the Standing Committee believes there is value in providing residents with greater opportunities to interact with their government. The public appeared to appreciate and utilize the pilot site as one place to go to view or sign various petitions, offering greater accessibility and transparency to citizens of the Northwest Territories. No insurmountable concerns arose during the pilot project. The Committee therefore considers that

this Assembly should offer an on-going electronic petition service, and revise the Rules of the Legislative Assembly accordingly.

Recommendation One

The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures recommends that this Legislative Assembly approve the implementation of an ongoing electronic petitions service to operate in conjunction with traditional petitions, and that the electronic site be operational for the fall 2012 sitting of the Legislative Assembly.

Recommendation Two

The Standing Committee on Rules and Procedures recommends that any necessary amendments to the Rules of the Legislative Assembly to permit the use of electronic petitions be drafted and presented for the approval of the Legislative Assembly during the fall 2012 Session.

