



BRIEFLY

Legislation that would create a "Citizen's Alliance for Government Accountability" is languishing in the legislature.

WRC Board Hears Sonntag on Accountability

State Auditor Brian Sonntag says his idea for an Alliance for Accountability has generated a lot of discussion and interest. But legislation that would create such an alliance is languishing in the Legislature.

HB 2793 would create the citizens' alliance for government accountability, consisting of a 19-member panel of government officials, legislators, representatives of business and organized labor and others.

One of its functions would be to "assess the quality and integration of state agency strategic and quality plans, performance measurement and performance assessment in planning, budgeting, and managing the state resources."

In short, it would institutionalize performance audits.

When Sonntag was elected as State Auditor in 1993, performance audits lay outside the scope of his office. His job was confined to auditing the books of Washington's some 2,400 agencies and local governmental entities.

State lawmakers later expanded the scope of Sonntag's job. Now when directed by the Legislature, Sonntag will supervise performance audits as well. But Sonntag has come to believe that the state should create a way to do more performance audits.

In his view, initiatives such as I-695, which requires putting all changes in taxes and fees to a public vote, crop up when people feel that state government isn't listening to them. And if there now is such a "disconnect" between the two, he said, it's government's job to reestablish the connection.

In November, Sonntag penned a letter to Governor Gary Locke calling for creation of an Alliance of Accountability. Composed of "a brain trust of Washington's top leaders and best thinkers," the Alliance "could address fundamental and far-reaching questions such as what services state government should provide, and what the state will do to support local governments."

"I would like to see the Alliance address a comprehensive performance review of state government operations," Sonntag said. "That is something we have advocated for the past six years. Other states have undertaken reviews with some dramatic achievements. This Alliance could design a review that is the right fit for Washington."

Sonntag talked about his idea for an Alliance and what's happened since his November letter during the February meeting of the Research Council's board of trustees and referred to the bill that would create it.

HB 2793 would "establish a permanent means of bringing citizens, public employees, policymakers, executives, businesses, labor organizations, management experts together for the continuous enhancement of state government and agency performance and accountability and to make our

108 S. Washington St., Suite 406

Seattle WA 98104-3408

PH 206-467-7088

FX 206-467-6957

www.researchcouncil.org



Washington state government and its agencies the most effective and efficient in the nation.”

On an 8-0 vote, the House State Government Committee passed the bill to the Appropriations Committee, where it still lies, after the legislative mid-session deadline for bills to move from one chamber to the other.

In a Feb. 17 letter to the bill’s sponsor, Research Council president Richard Davis supported the bill’s objective of enhancing citizen participation in public affairs and increasing governmental accountability. He said that since voters adopted Initiative 695, the Council has shared concerns that the public lacks confidence in the efficiency and effectiveness of many governmental programs and activities. “Over the years,” Davis noted, “the Washington Research Council has participated in and monitored various efforts to improve government performance.”

Sonntag said he’s now pushing for a \$25,000 budget provision for his agency to study what other states have done in the way of accountability initiatives. Even if the provision is left out of this year’s supplemental budget, his office will undertake such a study. “We’re going to do it,” he declared. And then his office will craft accountability legislation for next year’s legislative session.

Sonntag alluded to initiatives in Colorado and in Texas, which he said has identified efficiencies expected to yield savings of \$8.1 billion.

In Colorado, Gov. Bill Owens last year created the Office of Innovation & Technology. “The goal,” Owens said, “is to see how we may streamline the operations of state government, improving management structures, technology usage and implementing customer-service driven processes.”

Owens said he believes Colorado stands at a crossroads, and he issued a warning that Washington’s lawmakers would do well to heed: “The world is changing all around us and we face two clear choices: Do nothing or change. If we do the former we fail to serve the citizens of Colorado and they will change us – through the initiative.”

Owen has indicated that change must take advantage of the Internet. Texas is thinking that way, too. Last year, the state’s Comptroller, Carole Rylander, announced an initiative, called e-Texas, aimed at capturing efficiencies through state-agency use of the Internet to serve customers.

“The private sector is taking advantage of new technology to deliver more goods and better service to their customers at a lower cost,” Rylander said. “As taxpayers become accustomed to that level of service, they will demand the same performance from their government.”

Said e-Texas co-chair Wendy Lee Gramm, “Texans should be able to go to one Web site and apply for and renew business permits and licenses, find out the latest test scores at their children’s schools and file their state taxes.”

Sonntag suggested that Washington would profit from fashioning a similar initiative: “I don’t know how we could do this without saving taxpayers some money.”

