



Date: March 7, 2005

To: Members of the Board of Regents, Commissioner Stearns

From: Ray Ford, Associate VP for Information Technology

Re: Web-Based BoR Meeting Presentation

CC President Dennison, Bob Wachtel – UM Director of Presentation Technology Service, Mark Sheehan – MSU CIO

First, I apologize for missing the normal deadline for BoR materials. As explained below, though the concept is simple we ran into practical issues which raised the question of whether we could implement the concept at a reasonable price. Just last week there was a breakthrough, so I think we should now be able to at least identify the cost of the solution, to allow all concerned to decide if this cost is justified.

The idea is to have all information for a BoR meeting on-line (on the Web site), then display that information during the actual meeting so it is visible to both the audience and the “Members” (Regents, Commissioner, and staff) seated at the front tables (see Diagram #1). This might require some changes in the structure and page templates used in the Web site, but we’ll ignore that for now to focus on the display issues that arise from the spatial and lighting realities of the typical meeting room. The audience and Members face in different directions, with the former viewing from afar, the latter from up close. The room must be maintained with normal light levels, with display and viewing technology that does not excessively block the audience and Members from seeing each other. And this must all happen in a way that does not create distractions for the Members.

Diagram #1 depicts a fairly standard “e-meeting” presentation scenario in which

- large screen displays are provided for the audience, one showing the current item (changing more frequently and showing the details) and one showing the agenda (changing less frequently and showing the context);
- one display is provided for each Member, showing the current item;
- all displays are synchronized and managed by a “display operator” who browses the Web site to bring up information on each display as needed.

The primary issue for the audience is whether the display is readable, which means matching the large screen displays to room characteristics, adding additional displays on the sides, at the back, or in separate rooms as needed.

The issues for Members are more complex. They need to be able to see information without constantly twisting around to read big screen displays. They can’t be required to run their own computer and browser, but some may want to be able to

call up personal notes on a separate computer that is not displayed publicly. They need to see and be seen, and will no doubt still need space for some papers, note taking, etc. The scenario outlined here attempts to balance these potentially conflicting constraints. It assumes that a single (low mounted, flat panel) display shows the current item, and that each Member has a hardcopy Agenda. This should provide reasonable visibility, plus table space for other materials. All displays are managed by the operator – the Member doesn't need to fiddle with or even have a keyboard and mouse. But, if a particular Member wants to refer to materials or notes on his/her own laptop, Diagram #2 illustrates how a (private) laptop could be positioned in this mix. The net result is a compromise that (I hope) balances various constraints and accommodates different member preferences.

Implementation of the proposed scenario looks simple – it seems to require only relatively inexpensive, commodity components, should be relatively simple to setup and take down, and thus should be feasible at all BoR meeting sites. It does require a robust network connection in the room, as well as customization to adapt the audience display for the details of the room's seating and lighting conditions. In theory, with a little preparation, this arrangement should be workable for all BoR sites. Ideally, equipment could be owned by the BoR, rented from a third party for each meeting, borrowed from the host site, or a little of each. But in practice it's not quite that simple ...

The big screen displays required to meet these specifications turn out to be rare and expensive (>\$10K), due to the need to make text readable over long distances in normal light. We do have displays like this, but they are permanently mounted in specific rooms that are not the rooms where the BoR meetings are typically held. Our initial checking found the closest rentals to be in Seattle or Salt Lake City, at what might be called "big city" prices and terms. This creates a problem in setting up a demo and brings the feasibility of this approach into question. We were blocked at this point for a while, but just recently have received some good news ...

About two weeks ago a plan was announced to construct a major new Hilton Hotel and Conference Center in Missoula. Within a few days of this announcement we were contacted by a company which says that it will support state of the art A/V needs for conventions in the new hotel, and which also is interested in supporting other meetings around the state. We talked specifically about the BoR meeting requirements, and have agreed to follow up with them after getting the Board's initial reaction.

So, the question I'd like to pose to the Board is the following: given that there is likely to be some (perhaps significant) cost in the A/V setup for a "more electronic" BoR meeting, does the Board want me to follow up to determine what the cost might be, or simply defer further action?