

Lights! Cameras! Action? Live webcasting and cable TV broadcasting of future public meetings of the Johnson County Board of Commissioners is coming to the citizens and taxpayers of Johnson County in the near future.

For me, it cannot come soon enough because it's a move in the right direction for county government in using new technology to move toward an electronic democracy that benefits all.

The new system will broadcast the Board's Thursday meetings by webcasting through the county's main website and telecasting through public access cable television. The public meetings also will be videotaped for future reuse and reviewing at later time.

Webcasting is e-democracy that's long overdue. It will provide more accessibility to county government by allowing citizens to watch important meetings live as they happen from the comfort of a home or office or anywhere with an Internet-capable personal computer. The proceedings also would be archived for future availability.

This innovative project is truly exciting because it will allow us to demystify the process of local county government. Webcasting and cablecasting will help citizens better understand how the Board of County Commissioners works, how important decisions that affect citizens' everyday lives are made, and will help voters hold elected decision-makers accountable.

That is democracy in its truest sense.

In the months to come, there's much work left to do before the lights go on and cameras get rolling.

For one, the Board's hearing room on the third floor of the Johnson County Administration Building in downtown Olathe will require significant, one-time modifications to accommodate broadcasting.

The hearing room, which hasn't changed much since the building opened in 1992, was not configured for broadcasting. Some of the required changes include the addition of production lighting, placement of camera sites, modifications to the cooling system to offset the heat generated by the additional lighting, and creation of a control room adjacent to the hearing room.

The county has authorized funds for the modifications and the one-time purchase of audio equipment, cameras, computer software, and other equipment required in setting up the webcasting/cablecasting system.

The modifications to the hearing room are expected to begin the first of July and take about 14 weeks to finish. Physical modifications and installation of equipment are scheduled to be in place by October 1. Testing of equipment will require approximately another month to complete.

The county currently is negotiating an interlocal cooperation agreement with the city of Olathe for county use of the city's television production facility. It's an important link to connect what's occurring in the Board's hearing room to future broadcasting capabilities. The production includes cable TV facilities, cameras, recording studio, editing suite, and close-captioning equipment that's already used for cable television broadcasts of Olathe City Council meeting and other city programs to the community.

The city has informally provided use to its television production facility, including the sharing of staff, to the county for several years for the production of public information programs.

The proposed one-year agreement between the county and city to formalize the sharing of the television production facility is scheduled to come before the Board of County Commissioners on April 12 for review, discussion, and possible action.

Cablecasting has been utilized by several city and other public interest entities since the 1960s to increase public awareness of local municipal activities, services, and programs. Olathe has been airing and taping its city council meetings for more than a decade. In addition, several Johnson County School Districts provide access to their meetings and programs through cablecasting services.

Webcasting is a newer, but increasingly popular technology that's well suited to the county's website (jocogov.org), which had more than 1.1 million visits last year. In a 2001 survey

of Johnson County citizens, 90 percent of the respondents revealed they had Internet access, 86 percent has access at home, and 69 percent used the Internet every day. That means local citizens are very comfortable with the Internet and it's very accessible to them through the county's popular website.

If all goes according to plan, the cameras and lights to webcast and cablecast the weekly sessions of the Board will be turned on by November or December of this year.

The county's new public access network, however, needs one other vital commitment to ensure its success. It will need Johnson County citizens to use the technology being provided to become better-informed participants and better included in the overall governmental process.

The e-participation and e-inclusion of citizens will help ensure the success of the county's e-democracy. And in doing so, it will continue to keep fundamental democracy at center stage at the local level of government where it truly belongs for everyone.