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Comment

Gilmore gets B+ on technology

Paul R. Lawrence

A little more than one year ago, Jim Gilmore was elected governor of Virginia. In a series of articles for Washington Business Journal prior to the election, I outlined an ambitious technology agenda for the next governor.

I thought it would be interesting to give Gilmore an interim report card after one year in office. In short, the governor is doing well. As a former university professor, I feel comfortable with giving the governor a B+ based on his performance after one year.

I would also write the governor a little note that stated, "Upon the successful completion of several of your initiatives, you stand a good chance of receiving an A at the end of your term."

The governor took two key steps. First, he appointed Don Upson as Virginia's first secretary of technology and chief information officer. This appointment signified that the governor was indeed serious about his commitment to technology.

Upson appears to be off to a quick start. He is touching all the right bases and has an excellent grasp of the technology issues confronting the state.

Second, Gilmore created the Governor's Commission on Information Technology. This commission contains 36 members from government, the private sector, and academia, including 17 from Northern Virginia. Its first formal meeting was in Williamsburg Dec. 2. While one cannot always be confident that commissions will accomplish all of their objectives, its creation was an excellent move.

I agree with commission member Michael Daniels, vice president of SAIC, that, "The governor is doing the right thing in bringing together public and private sectors leaders in the state to discuss technology. This is clearly a positive step in its own right."

The governor, assisted by his secretary of technology and the commission, now needs to move on two fronts during the remainder of his term:

● Create a set of coherent public policies which collective will attract and retain high-tech corporations to Virginia; and

● Make Virginia an exemplary state in the use of technology to run its operations.

In the public policy area, this commission could be a great help to the governor. The commission is assisting the governor and Upson in creating a model Internet policy which other states can follow. Kathy Clark, CEO of Landmark Systems, says no state has effectively addressed Internet taxation, security and content issues.

She believes that a model Internet policy will provide security to technology companies already doing business in Virginia and encourage others focused on the 'Net to come here.

Another public policy issue that the governor, secretary and the commission should examine is the "wiring" of the state. The city of Blacksburg has long been acclaimed as one of the most "wired" localities in the United States. Nearly 40 percent of Blacksburg's population is on the Internet, and 62 percent has access to e-mail.

Should the Blacksburg model be supported and expanded statewide? Should all new buildings be wired for the Internet? What about tax incentives for companies that wire existing facilities? Will all new schools be wired? These unanswered questions are important because they will tell us whether Virginia becomes the leader in providing Internet access to all of its citizens, regardless of their income or geographical location.

Another challenge before the governor and his team is to modernize state government. Again, Virginia stands on the brink of becoming a model for other states. Harris Miller, president of the Information Technology Association of American, says, "When the state of Virginia is as easy to access as Amazon.com, then Virginia will be seen as the Internet capital of the world."

Will Virginia become the first state to operate on "7 (days) by 24 (hours)" basis? Will Virginia replace its current paper-based system with an easier, electronic based system? How soon will it be before citizens can go onto the Internet to the Cyber-DMV and renew their licenses or register their cars? When will Virginia citizens be able to use their credit cards to pay state taxes on the Internet?

While much of this is now in the planning stages, Gilmore's final grade will depend on successful implementation of these advances. If he does so, he will go down in history as the first "high-tech" governor of the commonwealth.

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