

Tracking Colorado Legislation

BY ROBERT LINZ

When the 72nd General Assembly commences in January 2019, many researchers will want to follow the developing legislation. In the Second Regular session of the 71st General Assembly, the House considered 441 bills and the Senate considered 280 bills on a wide range of subjects, both controversial and mundane.¹ Researchers need a way to sift through this large amount of legislation so they can track legislation pertinent to them through the legislative process. The General Assembly's website offers one approach. So too do commercial services, which offer not only access to the status of legislation and documents created in the process, but also methods to track and share the legislation's progress. This article examines three commercial services that provide varying levels of free access to their legislative tracking services and compares their offerings with the General Assembly's website.

Legislative History Research

A legislative history is one way to ascertain legislative intent when language in a statute is ambiguous.² When compiling a legislative history for a piece of legislation, researchers typically locate and review the documents created during the legislative process.³ These documents include committee reports, versions of the bills, and recordings of hearings and floor debates.⁴

Many researchers consider committee reports the most helpful indicators of legislative

intent, because it is the committee that weighs the supporting documents and testimony of persons familiar with the subject of legislation as it considers the bill. However, Colorado committee reports lack the detailed discussion of a committee's findings and discussion that researchers find in Congressional committee reports. Colorado researchers will also need to obtain the various versions of the bill to more clearly understand what language the legislature changed during the legislative process.⁵

Colorado researchers have another resource at their disposal when researching legislative history: audio recordings of the committee hearings and floor debates that have been recorded since 1973. Audio recordings from 2012 to present are available on the General Assembly's website, and all previous audio recordings are available from the Colorado State Archives.⁶ By listening to these audio recordings, researchers can often glean what intent legislators may have formed during the committee hearings or floor debates. Researchers can also listen to live proceedings during a legislative session.⁷

It is important to locate each of these resources when conducting legislative history research. Together, they form the core of understanding legislative intent as it developed or as it is developing.

The General Assembly's Website

The General Assembly's website provides access

to all of these documents, along with other useful information about legislators and the legislature.⁸ In 2016, the General Assembly's website was revised, which both simplified the process to locate and track legislation and created a more visually appealing interface. However, bills and legislative information before 2016 are still located on the previous version of the website. Researchers conducting legislative history research for older legislation will need to navigate the somewhat Byzantine labyrinth of pages of links containing this information. Happily, researchers tracking current legislation can enjoy the improved design of the new website.

The first step in the process is to identify relevant bills. Researchers can search for a bill on the General Assembly website by bill number, keyword, or sponsor. These search options can be used independently or combined with subjects to further narrow the list of relevant legislation. Researchers can quickly scan the result list of bills to identify the bill title, number, and originating chamber. This list also includes a brief summary of the bill, the last action taken on the bill, and the bill sponsors. Selecting any bill from the list provides more detailed information about the legislation, including the committees assigned to consider the legislation and where the bill is currently located in the legislative process. (See Figure 1.)

Using a tabbed design, the display includes easy access to various versions of the bill, fiscal notes, committee reports (such as they are), and votes of both the committees and full chambers. The display also includes a bill history, indicating what action was taken on the legislation on what dates.

Information gathered from the bill history and from the committee reports can be used to locate the appropriate audio recordings for the legislation. While these audio recordings are not directly linked to the legislation, they are easily found through the "Watch & Listen" link in the website's upper navigation bar. Upon landing on this page, researchers will have the option to listen to live proceedings or to access archived proceedings. (See Figure 2.)

Researchers can also share a bill on Facebook or Twitter. However, the website lacks the ability

RESOURCE QUICK GUIDE

SERVICE	WEBSITE	FREE OR FEE
BillTrack50	billtrack50.com	free and fee
Colorado General Assembly	leg.colorado.gov	free
CQ State	info.cq.com/legislative-tracking/fn-state	fee
GovHawk	govhawk.com/legislation	fee
LegiScan	legiscan.com	free and fee
LexisNexis State Net	lexisnexis.com/en-us/products/state-net.page	fee
Quorum	quorum.us/legislative-tracking	fee
TrackBill	trackbill.com	free and fee

to track a piece of legislation and share it with a group of researchers. These are features that commercial legislative tracking services provide.

Commercial Tracking Services

The product offerings for legislative tracking services are as varied as the individuals and organizations keen on tracking legislation. At one end of the researcher spectrum are individuals, grassroots organizations, and advocacy groups that likely have limited resources and few staff members. On the other end are lobbyists and law firms with deeper pockets and more complex and time-sensitive needs. Not surprisingly, companies provide a solution for each of these market participants. Companies that provide more robust, customized products for a fee include LexisNexis State Net,⁹ CQ State,¹⁰ Quorum,¹¹ and GovHawk,¹² among others.¹³ While these services may provide a demo or free trial, individuals and organizations interested in these services have to contact the companies to arrange a subscription.

Other companies offer Internet-based services that provide free access to some content while charging for more advanced content. These services include BillTrack50,¹⁴ TrackBill,¹⁵ and LegiScan.¹⁶ Because these three services have a free component, this article explores their offerings and compares them to those of the General Assembly's website.

BillTrack50

BillTrack50 is a legislative tracking service offered by LegiNation, Inc., located in Greenwood Village, Colorado. This service tracks legislation from all states and Congress. Features vary depending on the subscription level chosen. Bill Track Basic, the most rudimentary option, is a free service that provides links to the General Assembly's web pages to access a bill's history, versions, and vote totals, similar to the General Assembly's website. (See Figure 3.)

Researchers can search for a bill by bill number or by keyword. Coverage is limited to the most recent session of the General Assembly. However, researchers can search for bills across multiple jurisdictions and compare bill versions.

BillTrack50's advanced features are available with a paid subscription.¹⁷ For \$550 per year for a single state or topic, researchers can get bill alerts, bill sheets, bill widgets, and stakeholder pages (secured bill sheets that are shared with a defined group for discussion and analysis on legislation).¹⁸ Other features, including access to all states and Congress, are available for additional fees.

TrackBill

TrackBill is similar to Bill Track 50: researchers can access legislative documents with a free account, but must pay for a subscription to take advantage of the tracking features. The free

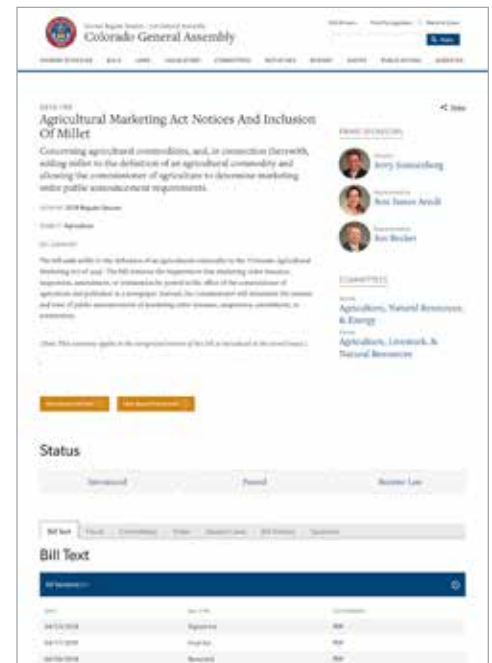


Figure 1

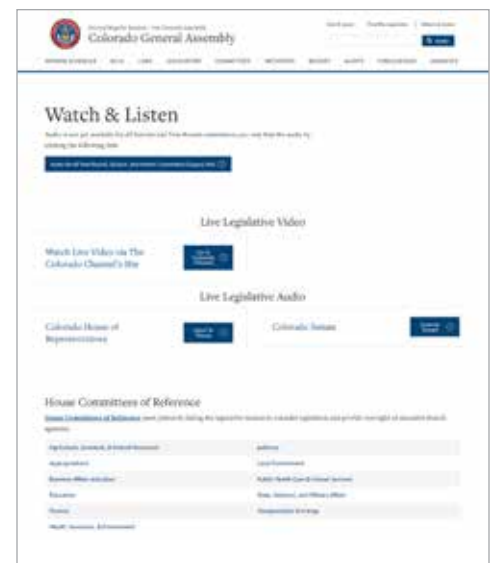


Figure 2



Figure 3

service provides access to the legislation of all states and Congress. Coverage dates to the 2013 legislative session. Keyword searching is provided, and researchers can limit search results to legislation with only upcoming hearings or with recent activity. While TrackBill provides the same information as Bill Track 50 and the General Assembly’s website, it does so as one long page. (See Figure 4.)

Researchers can share the legislation on social media or print a bill. They can also find similar bills, as TrackBill will run the search phrase in other jurisdictions’ legislative databases.

Once legislation has been located, paid subscribers can track legislation.¹⁹ The service will push out to subscribers real-time updates to a computer or mobile device. Additionally, TrackBill will calendar committee hearings for those bills. As with other subscription services,



Figure 4

researchers can share the bill’s progress via social media or with a small group of constituents.

LegiScan

LegiScan offers the most comprehensive col-

lection of features of the three free commercial services. The basic service, called OneVote, provides access to legislation from the user’s home state and Congress. Access to Colorado legislation dates to 2010. LegisScan presents legislation information using a tabbed format. (See Figure 5.)


As with the other services, it provides access to the bill summary, bill status and history, sponsors, committees, votes, and bill versions. Researchers can locate bills using bill numbers or keyword searches, or use advanced keyword search options, including Boolean and proximity operators and meta prefixes.²⁰

Unlike the other services’ free offerings, researchers can monitor up to 25 bills, receiving weekly email updates on them. They can also share information about the legislation with a group of other interested persons in addition to the usual social media outlets. Interestingly, LegiScan will provide datasets of the legislation data for importing into other programs.

Researchers can subscribe to additional service levels for a fee. These service levels enable researchers to track more bills from all the states, provide additional reporting capabilities, and share the legislation with more groups of people.²¹

While not as visually appealing as the other services, LegiScan provides more features in its free services and offers competitive pricing for its advanced services.

Conclusion

Researchers who need to track pertinent legislation during the upcoming session of the General Assembly have several tools at their disposal. The General Assembly’s website is a good source for Colorado legislation and the only source for audio recordings. Free commercial services often provide much of the same information in a different format and with a few additional features. Among them is LegiScan, which offers a comprehensive set of features and provides monitoring and sharing of bills in its free basic service. Researchers can also explore some of the fee commercial services, according to their legislative research needs. 

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Figure 5



Robert Linz is the associate director and head of public services at the University of Colorado's William A. Wise Law Library, where he teaches Colorado legal research, among other duties. He has authored several works on Colorado legal research, including *Colorado Legal Research* (Carolina Academic Press 2019).

Coordinating Editor: Robert Linz, robert.linz@colorado.edu

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NOTES

- 2018 Digest of Bills Enacted by the Seventy-first General Assembly, Second Regular Session, prepared by the Office of Legislative Legal Services, <https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/digest2018.pdf>.
- CRS § 2-4-203 lists several methods for deciphering ambiguous language to ascertain legislative intent.
- The Office of Legislative Services has compiled a very detailed explanation of the legislative process at <https://leg.colorado.gov/agencies/office-legislative-legal-services/legislative-process-0>.
- The steps in the legislative process and the documents created in that process are colorfully illustrated in a publication created by the Office of Legislative Services, https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/bill_becomes_law_chart.pdf.
- As an introduced bill passes through each stage of the legislative process, it is named a different version. The versions include the Engrossed bill, Reengrossed bill, Revised bill, Rerevised bill, and Enrolled bill, which is the final version, also called the Act. See note 2 for further information.
- For information and costs to access these older audio recordings, review the "Legislative Audio FAQ" on the State Archives website, www.colorado.gov/pacific/archives/legislative-audio-faq.
- Access to and information about these audio recordings are available at <https://leg.colorado.gov/watch-listen>.
- Colorado General Assembly, <https://leg.colorado.gov>.
- LexisNexis State Net, www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/products/state-net.page.
- CQ State, <https://info.cq.com/legislative-tracking/cq-state>.
- Quorum, www.quorum.us/legislative-tracking.
- GovHawk, www.quorum.us/legislative-tracking.
- Search for "legislative tracking services" on Google for a complete listing of companies offering this service.
- Bill Track 50, www.billtrack50.com.
- TrackBill, <https://trackbill.com>.
- LegiScan, <https://legiscan.com>.
- For a comparison of BillTrack50's service offerings, visit www.billtrack50.com/Products/ComparisonMatrix.
- For more detail on these products, see www.billtrack50.com/Products/Sharing#StakeholderPages.
- A complete list of features can be found on TrackBill's website at <https://trackbill.com/features>.
- Three meta prefixes are available: status, chamber, and type. Status refers to the bill stage (i.e., introduced, engrossed, enrolled); chamber refers to Senate, House, or Assembly; and type refers to type of legislation being sought (i.e., bill, resolution). For complete information on searching see the "Full Text Search" guide at <https://legiscan.com/fulltext-search>.
- A complete list of features is available at <https://legiscan.com/features>.