

CALIFORNIA
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2 Life in the California Capitol under Covid-19:
A Legislative Staff Perspective

By Brian Ebbert and Brandon Seto

5 Philip Keeney's California Plan for Japanese Libraries
By Michael Buckland

10 The Floating World of Edo Japan
By Diana Kohnke

20 Sutro Library Goes Virtual: Engaging the Public during a Pandemic
By Dvorah Lewis

FOUNDATION NOTES

23 News from Foundation Executive Director Brittneydawn Cook

24 Foundation is Gifted Two Rare California Pioneer Aviation Publications
By Gary F. Kurutz

28 Promoting Vertical Travel in 1920s: Gift from Anonymous Donor
By Gary F. Kurutz

Front Cover: An example of one of the striking ukiyo-e (woodblock prints) found in the Sutro Library collection. See "The Floating World of Edo Japan" by Diana Kohnke, pp. 10-19.

Back Cover: The Lowe Planet Airship flying over Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley. See pp. 24-25.

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LEGISLATORUM EST JUSTAS LEGES CONDIRE

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CALIFORNIA STATE ASSEMBLY
SESSION RECONCILIATION
MONDAY, APRIL 1, 2021
1:00 P.M.

Do Not Touch
Microphone

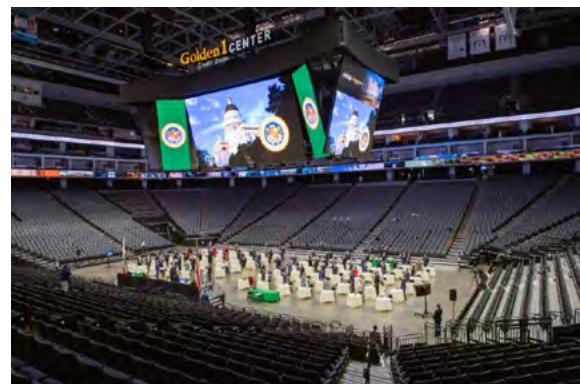
STOP THE SPREAD



**FACE COVERING
REQUIRED**



Above: The Communications and Conveyance Committee's Chair, Miguel Santiago, watching a witness video during the May 5th, 2020 Assembly meeting.



Life in the California Capitol under Covid-19

A Legislative Staff Perspective

By Brian Ebbert and Brandon Seto

The historic California State Capitol in Sacramento is typically a dynamic building bustling with lawmakers, government staffers, lobbyists, reporters, protestors, tourists, and thousands of schoolchildren. Since 1869, this magnificent structure has been the center of California government and is considered the “People’s House;” so much so, that the beautifully restored 19th-century domed structure draws over one million visitors annually. However, in March 2020, this lively and vibrant symbol of democracy transformed overnight into a cavernous

and largely empty structure, seemingly locked in suspended animation while legislative leadership and staff hastened to figure out a way to safely reopen the legislative branch of the nation’s most populous state. This article will describe how the California Capitol was impacted, and specifically, how the State Assembly adjusted its practices to adapt to life under Covid-19.

California’s legislative branch is the smallest branch of state government, with roughly 2,500 employees, most of whom work in the Capitol building. When the pandemic hit California in March 2020,

all State Capitol staff were instructed to stay at home pursuant to public health orders. Both houses immediately went into an extended recess. In the meantime, each house of the Legislature quickly deployed a small team of leadership and support staff to find solutions to enable California’s Legislature to continue functioning

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as a coequal branch of government. On the Assembly side of the Capitol Building, a small “strike team” of staff came together to tackle the logistical challenges of this goal. The team members were primarily from the Speaker’s Office, Rules Committee, Sergeants at Arms, and Legislative Counsel. These staff worked around the clock to develop protocols that transformed the legislative process. Within weeks, both houses developed new procedures for the public, legislators, staff, lobbyists, and expert witnesses to participate in proceedings. Each house was able to restart legislative committee hearings by late April 2020 and quickly began tackling the public health crisis and its ramifications.

A New Era: Capacity Limits, Covid-19 Testing, Working from Home

The first step toward reimagining and restarting the legislative process was to make the building safe from a public health standpoint. The Capitol was immediately closed to the public and to all staff

whose physical presence was not absolutely necessary for legislative operations. Both statehouse restaurants and the Capitol gift shop were closed until further notice and all public tours were canceled. A year later, many of these mainstays had yet to reopen. Rooms and offices were “deep cleaned” and intensive disinfecting protocols instituted. Hand sanitizer, physical distancing signs, and warning signs were placed throughout the historic structure. Disposable microphone covers and acrylic plastic shields were deployed in hearing rooms.

When Covid-era legislative hearings recommenced in late April 2020, the north Capitol entrance was opened to the public and to expert witnesses, while the south entrance was open only to essential Capitol workers. Any staff, public, or press entering the Capitol would now have their temperatures taken at the entrance and asked health-screening questions. Although some minor differences may exist between the two houses relating to their operations, the Assembly and Senate agreed upon general-public access proto-

cols for the Capitol. Essential Assembly staff were identified for each hearing by the Speaker’s Office in conjunction with the Assembly Rules Committee. Eventually, legislators and designated staff received Covid-19 self-test kits and were required to test themselves weekly at home before coming to the Capitol building each Monday. In contrast, the vast majority of Senate and Assembly staff worked from home during the pandemic. To adapt to this new way of working, the Assembly loaned computer equipment to staff to facilitate the continuation of their duties. Legislators, staff, stakeholders, experts, and advocates now had to conduct most meetings via teleconference or videoconference. Official legislative proceedings, floor sessions, and committee hearings, continue to be held in the Capitol, with lawmakers physically present and some participants joining either by phone or videoconference.

For the public and the lobbying corps, attending legislative hearings transformed significantly. The public was encouraged to watch livestreams of Assembly and Senate proceedings on the internet rather than attend in person. All hearing rooms, including the legislative chambers, were measured for physical distancing. Until recently, a reduced number of seats in hearing rooms were open to the public, and entrances were closed once a hearing room’s physically distanced capacity was reached. Few members of the public chose to attend in person. The largest room in the Capitol is the Assembly Chamber, which typically seats 80 Assembly Members, dozens of staff, and well over 100 guests and observers. Under physical distancing guidelines, the total number of members, staff, and the public that can be accommodated was reduced to less than 100. With adequately distanced space for only 61 Assembly Members, some Members stayed in their offices and then rotated into the chamber to add-on to votes prior to adjournment. The largest committee hearing room in the Capitol, room 4202, normally seats 25 members at the dais, and up

to 228 people in the audience. Because of physical distancing, it only accommodated 11 members on the dais and 28 in the audience. As a result, many hearings were moved to the more expansive Assembly Chamber to allow for safe physical distancing.

Technology Transforms Legislative Process

The lawmaking process invariably brings together a mix of people: legislators, staff, advocates, and the public. Most legislative work occurs at the committee level, where lawmakers hear from policy experts and the public, as they shape policy proposals. The Assembly has 33 standing committees, whose memberships range from seven to 31 legislators per panel. Under Covid-19 protocols, several committees had too many members to fit in the largest hearing room, so they instead had to meet in the Assembly Chamber. Aside from designating places to meet, the Assembly had to ensure that stakeholders and the public would be able to effectively engage in the policymaking process. To that end, the Assembly set up Witness Videoconference Rooms (WVRs) in the Capitol, where a handful of witnesses at a time could carefully gather and have their testimony transmitted into hearing rooms via secure Assembly-owned video-conference devices. WVRs enabled witnesses to give testimony in real time and to take questions from committee members using a stable connection rather than relying on their home Wi-Fi connections and third-party software. This was the first time in history that videoconferencing was incorporated into all Assembly hearings.

In another historical “first,” the Assembly also sent remote video teams to population centers across the state (San Francisco, Los Angeles, Fresno, San Diego). Using the same mobile technology that enables news correspondents to embed themselves and report from faraway places, Remote Testimony Stations (RTSs) located in parks, government buildings, and other public places allowed the public and experts to

transmit their live testimony to hearing rooms in Sacramento. Lastly, both houses utilized an elaborate phone-in testimony system that put public participation within reach of nearly all Californians, regardless of whether or not they had a stable internet connection. The public notices of hearings included viewer call-in information so that the public may offer their testimony via telephone. It became common for committee chairs to take testimony from hundreds of callers using this teleconference service.

History was made again in December 2020. As the Covid infection rates began spiking near the 2020 holiday season, the Assembly had to consider how it would safely swear in its members for the 2021–22 session. The state constitution requires each house to meet on the first Monday in December of each even-numbered year to organize. The Assembly looked at several possible sites in Sacramento, including universities, the state fairgrounds, and the downtown NBA arena. To provide maximum physical distancing, the Assembly chose to convene at the 19,000-person capacity Golden 1 Center a few blocks from the Capitol. Eighty tables were spread across the arena floor, and a portable dais was erected for the presiding officer. Due to the county stay-at-home orders, only a few people from the public and press attended. Still, the Assembly was able to hold session in the cavernous and largely empty arena, marking the first time an organizational session took place outside of a capitol building.

Civil Unrest Impacts the Statehouse

The peculiar calm and relative quiet at the State Capitol were not constant in 2020. The civil unrest that swept the nation in 2020 and 2021 also impacted the seat of California’s government. Law enforcement set up protective barriers and engaged with protestors on several occasions. Unlike the insurrection that breached the United States Capitol in January 2021, the statehouse in Sacramento was never compromised in the

course of various protests held during the pandemic. During one particularly intense lockdown, police roadblocks encircled the streets around the Capitol complex for a day, closing all road access to the public. Even authorized Capitol staff had to show identification at multiple checkpoints to access the building. The occasional unrest extended beyond issues of social justice and police brutality: groups opposing stay-at-home orders, masks, and vaccinations also began attending some legislative hearings in person, at times disrupting the meetings.

At this point, the more extensive barricades have been removed, the National Guard has left, and the police presence has diminished, but some capacity control measure remain in place.

The Feel of the Capitol

While legislative business has gone forward, an eerie silence still permeates the Capitol corridors. The building usually teems with diverse groups scurrying and bustling about offices, hallways, the rotunda, and stairwells. Prior to the pandemic, it was common for hallways to become so packed with activists and advocates that the air would become oppressive. When hearing rooms were at capacity, some people would sit on the floors outside the rooms, working on their tablets and laptops. This freneticism was replaced with smaller numbers of employees that must come in each day to provide support for committee hearings and floor sessions. For much of 2020 and 2021, the few “essential” personnel and the 120 lawmakers of both houses found themselves traversing a largely empty building. As vaccinations became more widely administered and the pandemic eased in June 2021, additional personnel and the public were allowed in the Capitol building. A thought it heartens us that we could find a way forward in the darkness of this pandemic, the Capitol community greatly anticipates the day when the People’s House is fully opened and back to pre-pandemic protocols.