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Idaho's high court to start live video - streaming arguments

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BOISE - Idaho's Supreme Court will begin live video streaming all its oral arguments from its main Boise courtroom next week, in a joint project of the court and Idaho Public Television, which pulled it together despite a dearth of state funding.

Though Washington has long televised its Supreme Court arguments, fewer than a third of states provide such video access; it's a big step for Idaho, expanding the service that now live-streams all legislative proceedings and some executive-branch meetings on the Internet so folks anywhere in the far-flung state can watch.

"There's a definite benefit to the citizens," said Steve Kenyon, clerk of the Idaho Supreme Court.

Among those likely to tune in to the webcasts: Parties in appeals to the state Supreme Court, who now won't have to drive to Boise to see the arguments before the justices; lawyers who are litigating similar issues in district courts around the state and can see how those issues play out live at the state's highest court; reporters covering cases that originated in far-off corners of the state; and citizens interested in seeing the highest level of the judicial branch of state government at work.

"It's giving people around the state the ability to stay in contact with their governmental process, and we're just proud as punch to be involved with it," said Peter Morrill, general manager of Idaho Public Television.

Adding the high court's arguments will expand IPTV's "Legislature Live" service, which already has been streaming numerous executive-branch proceedings in addition to legislative action.

"We just find it amazing that we have all three branches of government under Idaho Legislature Live," said Jeff Tucker, production and creative services manager for IPTV, who noted that as a result, the name of the service soon will be changing to "Idaho Live."

Morrill said, "We believe there is a great demand, and this is a great place for citizens across the state to be able to look in on the affairs of state government." He added, "Certainly Legislature Live has shown the power."

Idaho Legislature Live launched in 2008, when the Idaho Legislature moved out of the state Capitol for two years to allow the statehouse to be renovated. At its temporary quarters in an old courthouse across the street, now dubbed the Capitol Annex, there was no space for the traditional public galleries - so a virtual public gallery was created through the live video streams, which include all sessions of the House, Senate and joint budget committee; plus audio streams of all other committees.

At the same time, the statehouse renovation included the technological infrastructure to allow higher-quality webcasting once the Capitol reopened in 2010; the streaming service has since expanded to include reapportionment hearings; Department of Education sessions on school technology; and more.

Idaho Legislature Live currently has an operating budget of \$220,000 a year, but the state has put no general tax funds into it; as a result, IPTV has drummed up the money through sponsors, grants and viewer donations.

Under a memorandum of understanding signed in late July between the Idaho Supreme Court and IPTV, the court paid for the hardware to add its courtroom to the service, about \$65,000 worth of cameras and fiber, and IPTV absorbed the installation, maintenance and operational costs.

“We believe this is something we can manage effectively this fiscal year, and we believe that after this long, positive negotiation process that we’ve gone through with the Supreme Court ... that it makes perfect sense to do it now,” Morrill said. “We have the ability to make it happen.”

He noted that IPTV will ask lawmakers in January for a state appropriation to help support the Idaho Live service; a similar request last year was approved by the state Board of Education, but didn’t win the nod of the governor or lawmakers.

Donors who currently are helping support the service include the Idaho State Broadcasters Association, the Union Pacific Foundation, Idaho Cable Telecommunications Association, Idaho Association of Cities, Association of Idaho Counties, and IPTV viewers.