

November 20, 2014 in [Opinion](#)

## **Editorial: East Side's inclusion in legislative hearing a good first step**

The Spokesman-Review

A legislative committee meeting in Olympia will take testimony from three witnesses in Spokane on Friday morning in a history-making outreach to Washington citizens who live east of the Cascade Mountains.

Eastern Washington legislators have complained for years that their constituents were shut out of a vital part of the lawmaking process: committee hearings that often result in amended bills. Unless potential witnesses were prepared to chance winter conditions on Snoqualmie Pass and make a 10-hour round trip, or bear the expense of flying, their live commentary was limited to the telephone. Letters and email are not necessarily included in the bill report that summarizes testimony.

Lobbyists and West Siders have a huge advantage.

Other states have long allowed for testimony away from their capitals. Alaska, with the nation's least accessible capital, has 23 sites where witnesses can step before a camera and make their opinions known.

Friday's testimony will be taken from Building 15, Room 210, at Spokane Community College. Washington's extensive community college system is a ready-made forum for hearings: The technology is already there.

Unfortunately, only three witnesses will have the opportunity to speak, but their topics are important, especially the first: Should the election of state Supreme Court justices be done by district instead of statewide, as they are now?

The only one of nine justices on the court from east of the Cascades is Debra Stephens of Spokane, who was appointed by Gov. Chris Gregoire. Her most recent Eastern Washington predecessor, Richard Guy, was appointed by Gov. Booth Gardner. Both subsequently won elections, but had they not been incumbents, chances are the court would have no Eastern Washington justice.

Gov. Jay Inslee ignored calls for appointment of a second Eastern Washington justice when Jim Johnson retired earlier this year, choosing instead King County Superior Court Judge Mary Yu.

Jason Mercier, director of the Center for Government Reform, will recommend a constitutional amendment authorizing regional elections, perhaps using appellate court boundaries that would reserve three seats for Eastern Washington. Mercier, by the way, also has been a champion of remote committee testimony.

The other two witnesses, Spokane Valley police Chief Rick VanLeuven and Deputy Todd Miller, will discuss new breath-analyzer technology.

Spokane Valley Sen. Mike Padden chairs the Law and Justice Committee, which will be holding the hearing. Those who cannot attend can watch the hearing in its entirety – there will be other witnesses – on TVW, which at least gives people outside Olympia a way to watch what goes on.

If Friday's hearing is a success, other committees should get on board. The connectivity is there, but the colleges will need some money to staff additional venues. It's an investment in democracy, but lawmakers already are starving TVW; not a good harbinger.

Eastern Washington will be on the outside looking in until the cameras work both ways.