

Federal Election Commission

Continuation of Website and Internet Communications Improvement Initiative

Nov. 5, 2009

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION
999 E Street, N.W.
9th Floor Meeting Room
Washington, D.C. 20463

COMMISSIONERS:

STEVEN T. WALTHER, Chairman
MATTHEW S. PETERSON, Vice Chairman
CAROLINE C. HUNTER, Commissioner
DONALD F. MCGAHN II, Commissioner
CYNTHIA L. BAUERLY, Commissioner
ELLEN L. WEINTRAUB, Commissioner

FEC STAFF PRESENT:

ALEC PALMER, Acting Staff Director
THOMASENIA P. DUNCAN, General Counsel
MARY DOVE, Commission Secretary
ROBERT BIERSACK, Special Assistant to the Staff Director for Data Integration

PROCEEDINGS:

CHAIRMAN WALTHER: This matter is a Continuation of Website and Internet Communications Improvement Initiative. I thought it would be helpful to have this at an open session. It is an update on where we have been with that Initiative.

We had two days of hearing and much comment. We received over 250 comments on how we could improve our website. Our staff has been working diligently and sometimes feverishly to work through that, trying to figure out with our own staff, with our own resources, how we can take some of these helpful recommendations into consideration and how to implement those that are low-hanging fruit, as is popular to say around here, or what takes some more

planning.

There are a number of people that deserve a lot of credit for this. Of course Rob Biersack and Alec Palmer are among those, as is Patricia Young Wei Luo; throughout this agency, people that are involved in information, Art Forester, those that really have been really anxious to see how can we make this better so that anybody can get on our website without having to be the laity, as we learned yesterday, without having to be an expert, and really understand how to get into campaign finance law, where we go, how to get the numbers so that they are understandable, and how to download things so that they are respectable in the way they look when they are trying to print them out. We have learned an awful lot.

So this is a quick update. There is a document that was made public today and will be on the website that represents the work of our staff so far on where we are going. So I will turn it over to Mr. Biersack for a short update.

MR. BIERSACK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Really just very quickly, it is an effort to synthesize the comments we got in those two days of hearings and to give people a sense for how we are moving forward in trying to address all of those. I think of them as grouping in a couple of different ways; one of which you mentioned, the kind of retail presentation of material on the website and how people can get to that. That involves changing the language, examining the way we have described things and presented things in the past and the navigation tools that are available. Those kinds of efforts are under way and then we will see some progress very quickly, I think, in a couple of those. We have had some very good, useful meetings of staff from around the building

in terms of the language we use and changes we might make and I think we might be ready to bring some of those forward very quickly.

Also, the general presentations that we make, designing appropriate pages with the right tools for different kinds of audiences, we are moving forward with that and I look forward to good progress there, and navigation in general, those kind of things in the kind of retail presentation. There are some fairly specific examples in the document with some timeframes associated with those.

Another is the kind of wholesale presentation of the materials so that other people can take it and put it in their computers, use it as they will; again, we are focused on a number of efforts there, some of which we have already made progress on. We have created this new data catalog that has been available now for a couple of weeks and has been received nicely by the community.

CHAIRMAN WALTHER: Do you want to describe that briefly?

MR. BIERSACK: It is a presentation of large blocks of material, data that we make available now in different formats so that different kinds of computer programs can use them most effectively. So that they can receive updates automatically. So that the computers can talk to each other as opposed to requiring a whole lot of human labor in between. It is one of the things that a number of the commenters suggested strongly that we should pursue, and it is consistent with changes that a lot of other government agencies have made at the same time.

We have a catalog. We will expand that regularly. While we have said we have put in a data set section of the document that suggests we are finished, of

course none of these things are really ever finished. What we have done is, we have created the template, and now we are going to fill it with as much information as we can over time. So there will be constant progress there as well.

Programs that will allow people to use -- they are called APIs -- where the computer really can directly come in and get information from us. Those are also under development now, and we expect to see some of those even before the end of the year. So we are looking forward to that as well, but that is a little bit removed from the audience in general. It is something that computer people understand, and will take real benefit from and will allow other organizations to receive the information quickly, present it in the ways that they choose to present it, more flexibility, lots of innovation that we will see that way, so we are looking forward to that too.

In the area of legal research, there are lots of efforts underway to expand the materials that are available on the website. MURs that are older, where we didn't have digitized information before, we have undertaken an effort to get that in a computerized form, and that will be available before the end of the year, with a nice searching capability on the front of that, as we move toward integrating all of those old cases in with the material we have from more recent closed enforcement actions.

Similarly in the context of Advisory Opinions, more background information, requests and other kinds of material that we hadn't made available from earlier years, we are working on that. A regulations database that will allow people to more flexibly search through the information in rulemaking processes that we have undertaken over time. That was something else that people emphasized and that we are working on now.

Additionally, we are drafting a document that will come to you shortly that talks about web governance, how within

the organization, we should manage this process. We heard a lot from people the last day of the hearing. It was very helpful in terms of our own focus on this as a unique kind of project, and how we might organize ourselves to better take advantage of that. So we thought about that and worked on it, and would be interested in having your input in that process as well.

I am sort of wistfully reminded of one comment that we heard from Commissioner Toner who suggested that maybe we should pick two or three things and focus on those. While that would be nice, it is just not practical in many respects to do this kind of work that way. All of these things are so interconnected, and there is a short term and a long term implication to lots of what we do here, so we are trying to manage all of these balls that are in fact in the air in a way that makes the most sense, but also allows us to make progress sort of generally in a broad brush over time.

We will be successful hopefully much of the time. There will be things we fall short on, I am sure, but this gives us an opportunity to lay out for people what we think we heard, and how we are addressing it and with some accountability associated with that. We have a path we need to follow, and we have laid it out so hopefully people can check up on us.

CHAIRMAN WALTHER:

Thank you. The report does show the areas you are considering on working on now, talks about how they integrate with some of the suggestions that were made, and also does have some expected dates for completion, which I think is good to keep us all moving in the same direction and reasonably in sync.

Again, thank you very much and all of the other staff that have been working on this.