NewsBank

and Observer (published as The News and Observer) · December 26, 1985 - page 45
December 26, 1985 | News and Observer (published as The News and Observer) | Raleigh, North Carolina | Page 45

Computer Age coming to General Assembly

By CHARLES BABINGTON
Staff Writer

In six months, North Carolina might become the only state in which residents can dial a phone number at any time and have a computer tell them the status of a bill pending in the state legislature.

By October, a legislator wishing to rewrite a state law may be able to sit down to a computer terminal, call up the law on the video screen, type in the desired changes and immediately print his proposed bill. The procedure would shave minutes or hours off the current process, in which legislators or staff assistants look up laws in books and type and retype bill drafts.

These innovations are part of a plan to change the N.C. General Assembly from one of the nation's least automated state legislatures to one of the most sophisticated in terms of computer use. The man pushing most of the buttons is M. Glenn Newkirk, a burly Arkansas native the legislature hired last year as its director of automated systems.

"We are on a fast-track schedule to bring into the North Carolina General Assembly many of the . . . capabilities that have existed in some of the other state legislatures for a period of time," Newkirk said in a recent interview from his office, which opens onto the legislative parking garage.

"One year ago, the North Carolina General Assembly stood . . . perhaps in the lower quarter of office automation and legislative information systems," he said. Within 10 months, he said, "We'll be in the upper quarter."

The plans, which eventually could cost the state $3 million, require approval of the legisla-
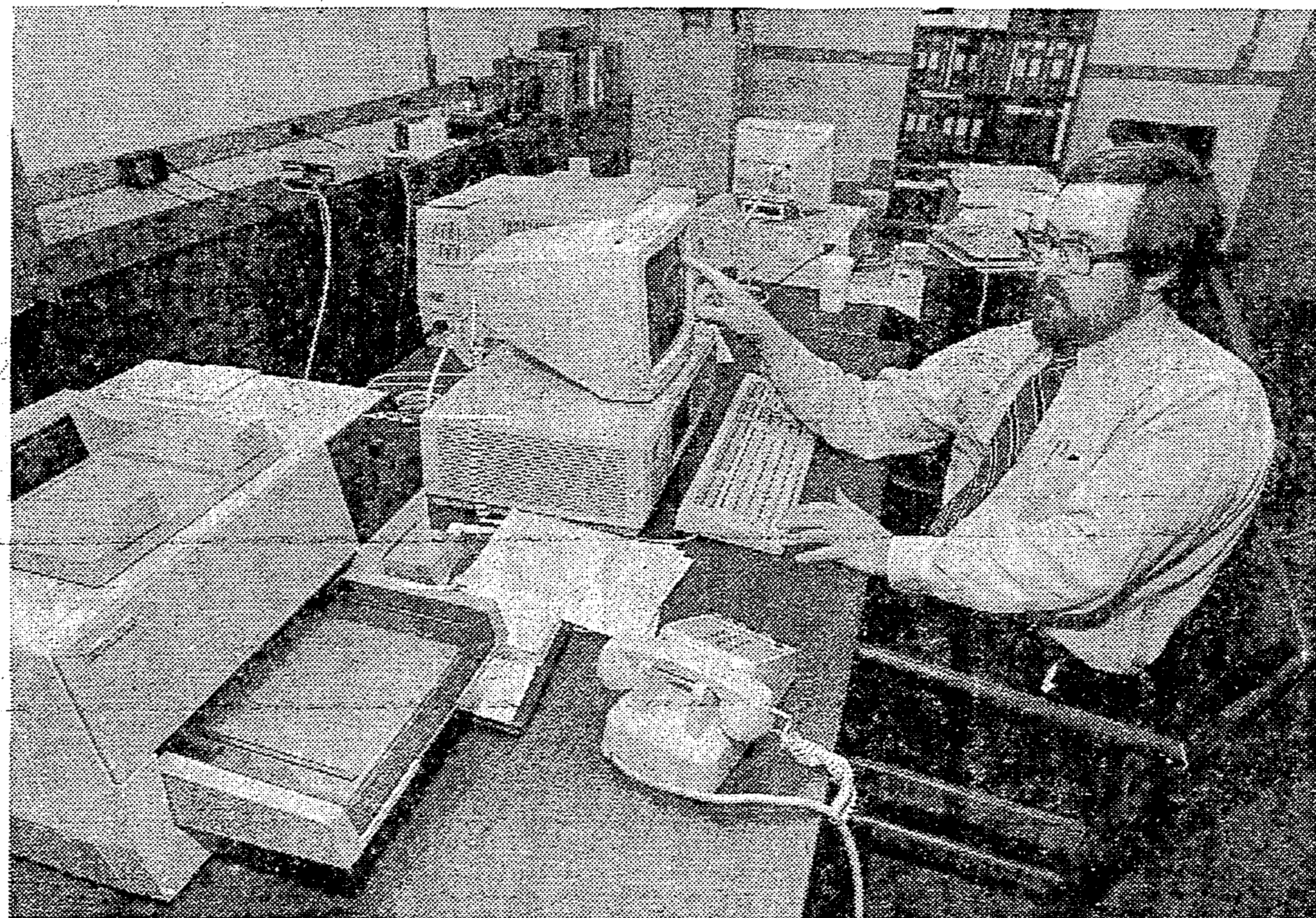
Staff photo by John Rottet

M. Glenn Newkirk, director of automated systems for the General Assembly, at a terminal

NewsBank

and Observer (published as The News and Observer) · December 26, 1985 · page 46
December 26, 1985 | News and Observer (published as The News and Observer) | Raleigh, North Carolina | Page 46

Computer system could increase efficiency of General Assembly

ture. But the strong interest of key legislators make such approval likely.

Senate Majority Leader Kenneth C. Royall Jr., D-Durham, and three other legislators form a subcommittee of the Legislative Services Committee that guides Newkirk's plans and progress. The other three members are Rep. William T. Watkins of Oxford, Rep. Daniel T. Blue Jr. of Raleigh and Sen. David R. Parnell of Parkton. All are Democrats.

Newkirk's plans would enable legislators and their assistants to use computers to produce and retrieve hundreds of reports, calendars and bills that now are typed and distributed on paper. Computerization would make information about the economy, tax trends and other matters available more quickly to legislators and the staff lawyers and researchers who advise them, Newkirk said.

"There will be a substantial productivity increase in the legislative staff," Newkirk said.

He conceded, however, that the planned computer expansion will have political ramifications as well.

Politicians who have, or appear to have, the most and best information often control legislative initiatives, debates and results. In an arena where the legislative and executive branches vie to set political agendas, the expanded computer operations will give the legislature a new asset, Newkirk said.

"The legislature is a separate branch of government, and our government rests on a foundation of checks and balances and separation of power," he said. "It's clear that for many types of information, the legislature has relied heavily on the executive branch in the past."

Private citizens — even those who follow legislative action closely — will derive few direct benefits from the proposed computer expansions. Except for the telephone line to inform callers of a bill's status, the major programs being planned would be accessible only to legislators and staff members, Newkirk said.

Just as major spending bills now are carefully guarded from reporters and other non-legislators until the moment they are handed to committee members, so would computerized information about proposed bills, economic trends and other matters be available only to General Assembly members and authorized employees, he said.

Newkirk said he would regularly change passwords and other codes that would enable authorized people to use the legislative computer system. "Everything in the legislature revolves around strategy and timing," he said. "Therefore, security of the information system is crucial."

Despite his interest in secrecy, Newkirk is proud of one proposed feature that would be available to anyone with a push-button telephone: the bill-status system.

During a legislative session, hundreds of people call the Legislative Building to find the number and status of a pending bill that interests or worries them, he said. Those people — many of them lobbyists and government officials — usually need the information promptly, because committees sometimes act on bills with short notice.

Under the planned system, a bill-watcher still would need to know a bill's number, which he could obtain by phone from legislative employees. With the number in hand, the person could dial the computer information number, punch in the bill's number and hear a computer voice say where the bill is and when it is scheduled for action. The data would be up-to-date, Newkirk said, because legislative clerks would inform the computer as soon as a bill's status changed.

"It doesn't exist anywhere in the country," Newkirk said, but he hopes to have such a system working in North Carolina by June 1986, when the General Assembly convenes.

In addition to the bill-status system, the General Assembly plans three major features of its expanded computer facilities. Some are not scheduled until 1987, and none will be available to the public, Newkirk said. The proposed features are:

■ Quick access to various information about the state's economic features. The computer will give legislators up-to-date information about employment, population and hundreds of other topics. Currently, that information either is not readily available or is found in bulky paperbound reports that quickly become outdated, he said.

■ Computerization of all state laws. The proposed "statutory retrieval" system would enable computer operators quickly to call up state laws, including those recently changed by the legislature, according to topic. Legislators and staff members now rely on volumes of books that contain the laws. The books must be supplemented or replaced annually, after each legislative session.

■ Computer-assisted bill drafting. A legislator or staff member would use a computer terminal and the statutory retrieval program to quickly print a proposed new law or a change in an existing law.

Newkirk, 38, was steered to North Carolina by Royall. They met when Newkirk was working on computer programs for the National Conference of State Legislatures in Denver, Colo.

Newkirk, who makes $66,000 a year, said he particularly enjoys the political atmosphere of the General Assembly. "I could probably make a lot more money putting in computer equipment for fast-food restaurants," he said.

Legislators eventually will have access to computer terminals tied to the General Assembly's main computer, he said. But legislators who want their own microcomputers, which they could program themselves, will have to buy them, he said.

Newkirk, who keeps a manual typewriter next to his desk because he thinks it's wasteful to use a computer and printer to send a short note, said computers will not necessarily make the General Assembly a better public body.

"It's not a panacea by any stretch of the imagination," he said. "Computers don't make policy. It's not the computer drafting the bill."