



Increased security considered at state capitols

By Laura Kliever

Physical assaults on legislators in Minnesota and South Dakota have prompted officials in those states to look more closely into security at their capitol complexes.

In Minnesota, Sen. Randy Kelly says a combination of factors — including an attack on a fellow legislator that he witnessed, bomb threats and the fact that assaults in the Capitol markedly increased in 1999 — made him realize some changes were needed.

“It was a wake-up call to take a closer look at what we are doing and take some common-sense measures to address these issues,” the Democrat from St. Paul says.

Kelly, who chairs the Crime Prevention and Judiciary Budget Division in the Senate, was one of two legislators appointed to an ad-hoc advisory group convened by the superintendent of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension.

The group conducted an in-depth study of current security at the Capitol, similar states’ approaches and various ideas for ensuring a safer environment at the Minnesota complex.

Kansas’ and Virginia’s security operations were most closely studied because these states are similar to Minnesota both in terms of their demographics and their security concerns. The group also studied the work of the U.S. Capitol Police.

In January, Minnesota Department of Public Safety Commissioner Charlie Weaver released a report on the group’s findings and recommendations.

“Once the report came out, there were real mixed reactions,” Kelly recalls. “Some felt it made a lot of sense, in terms of being more security conscious. Others felt we should not be making the Capitol a fortress. I simply argued times have changed. We ought to take some common-sense measures to make sure the Capitol is safe for all people.”

The report found that, compared to most other states, the Minnesota State Patrol does not use licensed police, has minimal training in specialized areas such as dignitary protection, and cannot make arrests or conduct investigations of criminal law violations. In addition, the statute relating to the Minnesota

State Patrol does not provide any details regarding the duties or oversight responsibilities of the officers.

The January report recommends a phased approach to improving Capitol security and describes four options, which range in first-year start-up costs from \$1.8 million to \$6 million. Each of the options would cut down the number of public entrances, add electronic detection equipment, and increase training and the number of guards at the Capitol.

The advisory group also recommended the creation of a Capitol Complex Security Oversight Committee that would have statu-

tory authority and be accountable to the Legislature.

Kelly has introduced legislation that tries to walk the tightrope between ensuring safety and not overly restricting accessibility and freedom of movement in the Capitol.

His legislation aims to increase the training, number and professionalism of the security officers at the Capitol and would create the oversight committee recommended by the advisory group. The Capitol Complex Security Division would be merged into a new Capitol police department with law enforcement authority. Four additional state troopers would

be added to the governor’s security force.

However, the bill does not call for any tightening of access to the buildings that comprise the Capitol. The additional fiscal impact of Kelly’s bill over current appropriations would be about \$800,000. The bill was scheduled to be discussed at a legislative hearing by the end of February.


South Dakota studies system

In South Dakota, the Legislature’s Executive Board appointed a subcommittee to examine Capitol security after a legislator was physically accosted because of his views on a bill.

The group of legislators studied several issues, including the following: security chain of command, the installation of more safety equipment and an increase in training for patrol officers. However, the subcommittee decided that the Capitol’s current security system is adequate, at least for the time being.

“As we started looking through the issue in-depth, we saw that the Capitol is across the street from the highway patrol and that there is security downstairs,” says Senate President Pro Tempore Harold Halverson, one of the three legislators appointed to the subcommittee.

He said that while the committee’s recommendation to place a member of the highway patrol at the front door of the Capitol was not approved by the governor, an officer does come over to the building two or three times a day.

“We are pretty comfortable with the way things are now,” says Halverson, a Republican from Twin Brooks. A study of Capitol security may continue this summer with the Legislative Research Council. 

Alarming incidents

These statistics are based on reports of incidents that occurred at the Minnesota Capitol Complex. The assaults category includes cases of written threats. The disturbance category includes cases of harassment.

| | 1999 | 1998 | 1997 |
|--------------|------|------|------|
| Bomb threats | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Disturbances | 104 | 47 | 60 |
| Assaults | 61 | 18 | 25 |

Source: Minnesota State Patrol

Safety improvements made as part of Ohio Capitol renovation

Security was a high priority when decisions on how to renovate Ohio’s Capitol Complex were made in the 1990s, says Ron Keller, executive director of the state’s Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board. The board, which was instituted in 1987, was given legislative authority to manage the Capitol property in 1993.

“For this first time since 1872, there was a single point of management of the square,” Keller says. While the board includes members of various entities that use the Capitol Complex, its staff is responsible for carrying out all security measures on a day-to-day basis.

“With every decision that is made about a statehouse, there always needs to be a security component — from how you mop the floors to how you protect the people that work in or visit a building,” Keller believes. “It’s not like a paint job, where you can

finish and go away; situations change and they have to be continually looked at.”

Equipment such as cameras, duress buttons and motion detectors were installed during the Capitol renovation. While permanent metal detectors are not utilized, hand-held wands are used on occasions when the potential for threats or criminal activity is higher than usual. A Capitol security force, administered by the state’s highway patrol, also was formed to bolster security.

Keller estimates the cost for the increases in security to be “in the low millions,” but a definitive price tag isn’t possible to calculate because most of the measures were included in the overall appropriations for the renovation project.

No numbers were kept on assaults before the renovations, but Keller says that there currently is a very low incidence of security problems.