

New wiki to highlight legislative issues

By: Ted McKenna, *PR Week USA*

WASHINGTON: A think tank employee has created a legislative "wiki" that is intended to serve as a central source of information on US Congressional legislation.

Created by the Cato Institute's director of information technology policy, Jim Harper, in his off hours and with his own money, the new wiki, in beta mode, is located at www.washingtonwatch.com and is similar to the free online encyclopedia Wikipedia. It specifically focuses on pending Congressional legislation, with entries that provide links to the actual language of the bills, descriptions that can be edited by users, and space for comments.

North Bridge Communications is handling media relations and marketing of the wiki.

Promotion of the new Web site will focus on DC-area political publications, advocacy groups, think tanks, and other groups that contribute to public policy development, with North Bridge partners Paul Cummins and Philip Hayes providing media relations and developing marketing materials, and Harper himself doing most of the outreach to public policy groups.

WashingtonWatch.com was originally intended simply to provide public information on the cost of legislation to individuals or families based on research from the Congressional Budget Office. But with the development of wiki technology, Harper said he realized the site could be used by the public to understand legislation in general, and by public affairs firms and advocacy groups hoping to shape public understanding of particular legislation.

"Before long, it will be advocacy malpractice not to be engaged on the wiki because no matter what the issue is, somebody is looking it up on the Web, finding WashingtonWatch, and reading up on what a bill is about," Harper said, adding that about 7,000 bills are generated in every Congress. "If you're not taking a few minutes to put information on there, you're just blowing it."

Information on legislation is loaded automatically onto the Web site from the US Library of Congress' www.thomas.gov system.

Harper said some entries are already showing up high in search rankings on Google, whose ads provide some funding for the site, though it is not yet self-supporting.