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HEADLINE: Legislators switch to clicks; Computers: State senators begin the shift from pens and paper to laptop computers during the next session.

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BODY:

Goodbye to the reams of paper and the dusty binders stacked under the desks in the nation's oldest working State House.

Welcome to the Cyber- Senate.

The Maryland Senate is now wired. When they return Wednesday for the 194th legislative session, 22 of the 47 senators will go about the ancient business of lawmaking with the help of a quintessential modern convenience: laptop computers.

"I'm pretty computer illiterate," acknowledged Sen. Leo E. Green, 66, a Prince George's Democrat, as he started up his laptop during a training session this week in the Senate chamber.

"I want to get up to date, though," he added. "It's been a resolution of mine for a couple of years. It's the thing to do -- it's the way everyone is communicating."

Following the example of half the nation's state legislatures, the General Assembly is moving toward computerizing almost all the work that's done on paper.

The Senate is starting with a pilot project, developed in-house by the computer staff, which wired the historic chamber, created the software and bought laptops for \$2,159 apiece. The cost so far is \$186,000; plugging in the rest of the senators over the next few years will be an additional \$81,000.

Long dependent on paper

Much of the General Assembly's daily operations are already computerized. Staffers put all the bills and backup documents into computers, and computers are scattered throughout the State House complex, but lawmakers still work largely off printouts.

On the House and Senate floors, they rely on pages to distribute up-to-the-minute paperwork. In committee meetings, they take all their notes and write reports by hand.

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Catching up to other states

That seemed old-fashioned, not to mention inefficient, to lawmakers such as Sen. Patrick J. Hogan. The 36-year-old Montgomery County Republican, who has a part-time Web design business, has been pushing for several years to bring his colleagues on line.

"We try to promote Maryland as a high-tech state," he said, "yet from the standpoint of members of the General Assembly, we've been technologically behind many other states."

Faster research in chamber

The laptops will permit senators to look up bills, fiscal notes and committee findings in seconds. Instead of searching through the binders under their desks, or getting up to research the Annotated Code of Maryland, senators can retrieve the information with a computer click. They will be able to check e-mail messages from constituents and to cruise the Internet without leaving their seats.

"Right now, if I recall a similar bill came before us in the last session, I could call over a page and ask for that roll call vote," Hogan said. "But it would just take too long. The bill on the floor would have passed or failed by the time I got that information."

The lawmakers will be able to log onto their wireless laptops at any time outside the Senate chamber -- at committee meetings, community forums or in their hotel rooms. Several senators predict they will be working later into the night -- and that a filibuster could last much longer once their colleagues start reading from the Web.

Constituents' e-mail

"The school kids are ahead of the adults on this one," said Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, 58, a Baltimore Democrat who said she increasingly relies on e-mail to keep in touch with constituents. The chairwoman of the Budget and Taxation Committee said the computers "will probably save money in staff and supplies."

You do a lot more yourself

"You do a lot more yourself when you're on a computer," Hoffman said.

No one expects a drop in paper flow in the first year, however, nor a diminished role for pages. But that will change once a digital democracy becomes commonplace for all the senators -- and eventually the 141 delegates.

House to watch Senate

House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. said he is waiting for the results of the Senate experiment.

"The Senate is doing us a favor. They're plowing new ground and creating the infrastructure for the whole system," he said. "Once they've decided they've created the right model, we'll be able to plug right in."

Some of the senators who volunteered for the pilot project are computer savvy. Others, however, are apprehensive as they prepare for their electronic coming of age.

Looking forward to using it'

Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr., the Senate's longest-serving member, was hunting and pecking at the keyboard Wednesday, the second day of his training.

"This is a crash course," the Baltimore County Democrat said.

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Within a few hours, however, the 63-year-old lawyer was cruising the "Senate Notebook" at a brisk clip.

"I think it forced me to do something that I've been putting off for a long while," he said. "I'm really looking forward to using it."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S) Lesson: Sens. Gloria G. Lawlah and Thomas M. Middleton train on state-supplied computers in the Senate chamber.

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