

LAWMAKERS DEBATE 'E-CONGRESS'

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Federal Computer Week

May 2, 2002

With discussion sounding more like a science fiction movie than a congressional hearing May 1, lawmakers began exploring the idea of creating a virtual Congress that could operate in the event of a crippling terrorist attack or disaster.

Although the scenario may have seemed futuristic before Sept. 11, lawmakers now are determined to come up with contingency plans to keep government operating if the Capitol were destroyed or if members of Congress could not convene in the nation's capital.

"Our common sense dictates that we prepare for the unthinkable," said Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), ranking member of the House Administration Committee, which conducted the hearing.

When hijacked jetliners crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon Sept. 11, the Capitol and its office buildings were evacuated because officials feared another hijacked plane was heading in their direction.

A month later, the Hart Office Building on Capitol Hill was evacuated because of an anthrax attack. Lawmakers and staff members had to find makeshift offices for months while the building was decontaminated.

And now lawmakers say the problems are not over, and it is essential to prepare for congressional continuity in the event of another attack.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.), the Ensuring Congressional Security and Continuity Act, envisions making it possible to keep government operating using

the Internet and satellite technology to create an "e-Congress."

Langevin's bill, introduced in December 2001, calls for the National Institute of Standards of Technology to conduct a feasibility study of a solution that would enable members of Congress to log on to a system with secure biometrics technology from anywhere in the world.

"The most important thing is for this plan to establish a two-way backup communications system," Langevin said. "The e-Congress idea is simply a means to facilitate an organized system for congressional continuity if, and only if, an attack or disaster strikes again."

However, several congressional experts said creating a virtual environment would be illegal because the Constitution declares that Congress must assemble once a year.

Other experts cited technological problems, saying that it would be impossible to authenticate a congressman on the Internet, and that the importance of the face-to-face negotiating that occurs during a legislative session would be lost.

"I'm worried about the symbolism," said Norman Ornstein, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. "I want Congress reconvened as soon as possible [after a disaster]."

Ornstein said he would stop short of endorsing an e-Congress because it was not the intention of the framers who wrote the Constitution.

"No matter how advanced the technology, there is no substitute for the face-to-face conversations and informal interactions that are critical to genuine institutional and individual deliberation," Ornstein said.

Nevertheless, the panel used a videoconference to show how remote

technology could work – one component of a contingency plan.

With his picture beamed behind the panel, Stephen Frantzich, a U.S. Naval Academy professor, participated in the hearing from Prague, Czech Republic. He told the panel, "Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should necessarily do it."