

RFID System Opens Up Debate at Sweden's Parliament

The Riksdag has installed an RFID-based system that will let its members leave their seats and move about the chamber for debate. Eventually, the system could be used to allow parliamentarians to vote from anywhere in the chamber.

By Rhea Wessel

Sept. 18, 2006—The Riksdag, Sweden's parliament, has installed an RFID-based system that will give its members more mobility, allowing them to move forward to the front of the chamber for debate. Later, once the rules of order are revised, the system would be utilized to allow parliamentarians to vote from anywhere within the chamber. At present, the 349 members of the Swedish parliament must sit in their assigned seats to participate in debates and vote, a constraint that can slow down the legislative process and hamper debate.

The new system, already installed, will go live when the next session of the parliament opens on Oct. 3. Delegates will then be able to use it to log out of their assigned seats, move to the front of the chamber and log in closer to the people they are debating.

"It's a way to ease the flexibility of the room," says Mats Tidstrand, technical coordinator for the project at the Riksdag. "People can log in and sit where they want for debate. This should allow for a quicker, more effective and more interesting debate."

The system is based on an HF Multi ISO reader supplied by ACG Identification Technologies, headquartered in Walluf, Germany, and contactless ID cards made with Mifare passive 13.56 MHz RFID chips from NXP (formerly Philips Semiconductors). The cards are already being used by parliament members for access to government buildings. The RFID system was implemented by Syntronic, a Sweden-based integrator. Parliament tested the reader a year ago, and tests of the mobility system will continue while the Riksdag is in recess.

An RFID interrogator is encased in a stainless steel box (about 11 by 15 by 5 centimeters), mounted under the tray table in front of each delegate's seat. Delegates insert their ID cards in a slot attached to the box and located between two delegates' tray tables. When the card is in the slot, it is parallel to the reader at a distance of about 3 centimeters, says Bjoern Norinder, ACG's sales manager for Scandinavia and the Baltic region. Once logged in, parliamentarians slide the tray table forward and press a button to vote yes or no. The information is sent via cable connection to the Riksdag's standard voting system.

Although the system is already set up to allow delegates to vote from anywhere in the chamber, this second phase of the project won't start unless the parliament votes to change the rules of order, according to Tidstrand.

The rule change is expected to come up for a vote in about a year. If the measure is approved, debate will likely be even livelier since delegates will be able to move around even more. Voting will be faster because

parliamentarians will no longer have to move back to their seats to cast ballots. In fact, they won't even have to be seated to vote, since the system includes 370 electronic ballot boxes, some positioned for members who are standing. The new system will also be more secure since it allows for positive verification of the person voting. At present, anyone sitting in a delegate's assigned seat, including aides or other support personnel, can place a vote.

The change in the voting system came about because the parliament wanted to update its chamber furniture, which is more than 20 years old.

"We had to adjust a bit to the furniture with the technical stuff," Tidstrand says. He adds that he wishes he could say the IT changes drove the remodeling, but it was probably the other way around.

Although Tidstrand will not confirm the cost of the system, Norinder estimates it to have been several hundred thousand euros, not including software and installation. Software used to interface between the electronic ballot boxes and the original voting system was developed by the parliament's IT division.

The system may be the first of its kind to be implemented in a legislative body, says Norinder. "I've never heard of it anywhere else."

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