

## Transparency is key to open government

Government spending can be a foggy business, especially in Illinois. A little sunlight, however, could burn off that fog and bring some clarity into the government's budget process.

What kind of sunlight?

Transparency. To most people, "transparency" implies openness and clarity. Unfortunately, for most people, "government" usually generates thoughts of something closed off, hard to understand, and sometimes untrustworthy. As a first step to cleaning up government, restoring faith in elected officials, and showing families and taxpayers how the government uses their tax dollars, transparency sheds light on a characteristically opaque budget process.

Nearly everyone would agree taxpayers deserve to know how government spends their money. Transparency gives them that chance. Serving as a sort of X-ray machine, transparency allows people to look into the details of the budget books and understand where their tax dollars go — and to whom.

Recent questions surrounding the spending decisions of the Ottawa Visitors Center, unease over the financial situation of the elementary school district, and heightened concern directed toward elected officials regarding the Illinois state budget, highlight just a few reasons illustrating the need for more public understanding about the budget process at every level of government. Many in the community are looking for clearer answers about where their tax dollars go.

On a basic level, practicing transparency entails listing all government expenditures online in an easily searchable database. Just as you can open your personal bank account online and look up your spending activity, the database would provide the details of every tax dollar spent. The site would provide a complete, itemized, and clear description of all expenditures, including but not limited to all contracts, vendors, and grants. All expenditures would have a detailed account of the payment's purpose and who authorized the payment.

The public already has the right to see budget information and can obtain it through a Freedom of Information request. However, as anyone who has made a FOIA request knows, the bogged-down, bureaucratic, inefficient, and paper-heavy process does not make it easy to find the right information. By posting everything online, basic transparency gets rid of the unnecessary steps involved with FOIA and lets people go right to the source. This makes life simpler for all parties involved — including the government.

Small efforts in bringing more transparency to government can make a big difference. Across Illinois, both small and large organizations are joining the movement for open books and better government. The College of DuPage, the largest single-campus community college in the Midwest with an annual budget of nearly \$140 million, posts its check register online. Other, smaller school districts, like Huntley D158, Carpentersville D300, and Elmhurst D205, also understand how posting a check register benefits both the school and community. As Huntley Superintendent John Burkey put it, "Posting promotes transparency about what we're spending taxpayers' money on, and we have had absolutely no problems



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with public inquiries."

Not only does posting provide a service to the community, it also does so at a near to nothing cost. As Adam Andrzejewski, founder of For the Good of Illinois and advocate of transparency in school districts, explains, "Five school districts in Illinois, most of which have been posting online for years,

have studied the cost and employee time issue. The consensus is unanimous: virtually no cost or extra employee time. School districts have seamlessly folded costs (if any) and employee time into current operations. Small or large revenues in the electronic Internet age do not matter with our proposal."

Posting a check register sheds light on spending decisions, both good and bad. Taxpayers, communities and newspapers have every right to see public, financial information — and not at the discretion of groups like teachers unions, as the State Journal Register recently confronted with the Springfield School District 186 when it blocked the newspaper from seeing the school district's contract negotiations with teachers. Springfield schools have agreed to give everyone a pay raise and appear ready to take on \$18 million in debt without asking taxpayers. The school district should at least allow taxpayers to see exactly how and when that money is going to be spent. This situation highlights exactly why we need transparency.

The village of Golf, a small community with an equally small staff, just implemented transparency as part of village board policy. The Wheaton Park District also just decided to become transparent. The list is growing. All other school districts, park districts, county boards, and village boards — any body operating off tax dollars — can do the same, and should.

Clearly, Illinois is not immune to financial mismanagement or corruption, and many citizens have lost confidence in their elected officials to a disturbing degree. Even worse, it has reached the point where the public expects mishandling and insider deals to happen, especially around Chicago. Accountability and good government must return, but it won't happen without pressure from concerned citizens.

Transparency offers a simple, effective, low-cost tool to put the government back on track and back into the hands of the citizens government ought to serve. Implementing transparency at all levels of government, whether in school districts, park districts, county government, or the state, does not demand great effort; it demands basic respect for communities and taxpayers funding government operations.

It also requires citizens willing to stand up and demand more from their government. To learn more about citizens doing just that, contact the Illinois Policy Institute and get involved. You might find it surprising to discover just how easily dramatic, positive change can come about.

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