

Mon. Jun. 3 12:42 pm

84° Overcast

[Menu](#)[VIEW: Live Cams](#) [GET: Reward Coupons](#)

Saturday, June 1, 2013

Encourage your local government to embrace transparency

By **RICHARD ECKSTROM***Savannah*

Like 0 Tweet 3

Login to post a comment

If you've ever wondered how your city or Town Council spends your hard-earned tax dollars, there's a powerful tool that's available at your fingertips.

Using this tool, you could quickly and easily see which vendors your city or town does business with, along with amounts they're being paid, what they're providing, and other important details.

Residents of at least a dozen South Carolina counties, and an even higher number of municipalities in the state, already benefit from this service.

But every South Carolinian ought to be provided access to this information.

So what is this magical tool?

It's not magic, but it is powerful: It's called fiscal transparency.

To use this powerful and convenient tool to get the details of government spending, all you need is a computer with Internet access.

With that, you can go online and, with just a few mouse clicks, you can explore your local government's checkbook register.

There are many benefits for government to provide you access like this.

For one, it applies the best incentive to ensure responsible government spending — sunlight.

In addition, because fiscal transparency provides citizens with convenient access to information about spending by their local governments, it eliminates the need for people to ask for it and then often tolerate long waits for officials to reply.

Indeed, fiscal transparency often helps folks avoid the burdensome and often costly task of filing formal requests under our state's open-records law, the S.C. Freedom of Information Act.

Online spending transparency is something a government entity can usually set up fairly easily, using existing technology and staff resources with little to no additional cost.

What's more, for towns and counties that don't have websites, my agency — the state Comptroller General's Office — is more than happy to assist them with guidance on how to set up a transparency page.

And for some local governments, we could possibly provide support to get them started. If they would email their check register files to my office in a standard format, we could create a spending transparency page for them, as part of my agency's S.C. Fiscal Transparency Website, until they're able to set up their own websites.

For example, that's what we did for the city of Chesnee beginning in 2010. The city's finance director emails monthly check register files to my office and we post them. You can see the records at:

<http://www.cg.sc.gov/localgovspendingtransparency/Pages/cityofchesnee.aspx>.

When I launched the S.C. Fiscal Transparency Website in March 2008, it featured the details of spending by state agencies. Then over time we expanded the site to include spending of the state's federal stimulus funds, the school districts in South Carolina, and our state-supported colleges and universities.

We keep working to add local governments to our site, in an effort to establish a central transparency location for South Carolina's cities, counties and towns. There's progress. We recently added links to Greer, Rock Hill, North Charleston, Manning, Forest Acres and Beaufort County.

That brings us up to 12 counties and 20 municipalities. But there are many more than that in South Carolina.

Under state laws passed in 2009 and 2011, respectively, school districts and public colleges in South Carolina actually are now required to post their check registers and purchasing card statements online, although many already had begun to do it voluntarily because they knew it was the right thing to do.

Local governments in the state are not yet required to do so, although some are really out front in setting the right example for other local governments in the state.

Recently, the cities of North Charleston and Rock Hill — along with Aiken and Anderson counties and the school districts of Beaufort County, Pickens County and York County 3 (Rock Hill) — received Sunny Awards from Sunshine Review, a national nonprofit that encourages government transparency.

I congratulate our seven local government entities for their commitment to transparency. And while I don't necessarily think we need a state law mandating transparency for local governments, I encourage the rest of our cities, counties and towns to join this worthy movement.

Your local government might be more responsive to your voice, though, if you'd combine your voice with ours in this cause.

Richard Eckstrom, a CPA, is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S.C. State Guard.

Like

0

Tweet

3

[Login to post a comment](#)
