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Make sure spending is transparent

Mar. 14, 2014 | Comments

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Richard Eckstrom, South Carolina Comptroller General / Provided

Written by Richard Eckstrom

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This is "Sunshine Week," an annual observance of open-government laws. This is a time to remind government officials about important laws that require meetings to be held in the open and public records to be made available to citizens who request them. Sunshine Week aims to advance the idea that government works best when the sun is permitted to shine in.

I use the occasion to promote a kind of "sunlight" that's particularly important to me — spending transparency. Just as public officials seem to make better decisions when those decisions are made in the open, they're more accountable with public dollars when they allow any citizen to see how those dollars are being spent.

Several years ago, I huddled with a small team of staffers in the Comptroller's Office to brainstorm a way to make details of state government spending publicly available on the Internet. Our thought was that publishing every state agency's spending information at the checkbook level — including the date, amount, and recipient of each check — would increase accountability and make improper spending easier to catch.

The result of our efforts was the state's first Fiscal Transparency Website, which included monthly, itemized expenditures for more than 80 state agencies. At the time, this was considered a novel concept. Very few other states had transparency websites like ours. As the fiscal transparency movement took hold nationally, South Carolina played an important role. I received calls from other states asking for advice, and we were always happy to help. Today, all states have transparency websites.

I'd like to point out that, unlike most states, we established South Carolina's site without requesting or receiving any additional funds. We did it using existing staff and the existing budget of the

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Comptroller's Office. That's important because I'm now working to encourage local units of government — towns, cities and counties — to post their spending details on their websites. And that effort includes letting local officials know spending transparency can be achieved easily and inexpensively.

Written by
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When I first launched our campaign to urge local governments to bare their books, most local officials were reluctant. Some worried it would be too costly or too difficult. To alleviate this concern, I approached the mayor in my hometown of Irmo.

Irmo's experience validated my position that posting monthly spending reports online doesn't have to be expensive or difficult. And it opened the door for others to follow suit.

Today, 35 towns, cities and counties voluntarily give citizens easy Internet access to government expenditures. In addition to the benefits of increased accountability, these local governments are cultivating a spirit of trust between citizens and government. (All South Carolina school districts are required to post their check registers online under a 2010 law.)

While our local government transparency project has been far more successful than I'd imagined, there's still far to go. Too many governments are unwilling, even in this Information Age, to provide this level of access to citizens. Some probably won't do so without public pressure — or perhaps even without legislation requiring them to do so.

That's a shame, because the benefits of online fiscal transparency far outweigh any perceived costs.

Open-meetings and open-records laws are important tools to help ensure the public's interests are being served. They're vital to democracy. But Sunshine Week should also include a discussion about online spending transparency as a key to quality government.

Fiscal transparency causes those in charge to be more responsible with our tax dollars. It makes it easier to catch misspending. And it fosters public trust.

In other words, it improves the quality of government. And the quality of your government can directly influence your quality of life.

• *Richard Eckstrom, a CPA, is the comptroller for South Carolina.*

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