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Columns

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SOMETHIING TO TALK ABOUT

Whose bottom line is it anyway?

BY BYRON SCHLOMACH, PH.D.

More than 30 years ago, a U.S. senator asked how much the president knew and when he knew it. The senator knew there was a bottom-line answer, whether he got it or not. It was, after all, a simple question. Ask a similarly simple question about the budget of Texas (or that of just about any government for that matter) and you are no more likely to get a simple, bottom-line answer than did that senator.

With relative ease and simplicity any taxpayer should be able to find the answers to some pretty basic questions regarding what government is doing with his or her money. How much money has been, or will be, spent? What has or will it be spent on? Who is spending it? What is it accomplishing?

The current Texas state budget runs almost 900 pages and just a quarter inch shy of two inches thick. It documents the almost \$140 billion appropriated for fiscal years 2006 and 2007, of state, federal and some local (from school districts) funds.

Much of the volume of the state budget is made up of "riders," special, detailed instructions the legislature gives to the 188 separate agencies, including universities, to which these funds are distributed.

Additionally, the budget contains lists of "outcomes" and "efficiencies" - measures supposedly there to answer at least a couple of the questions mentioned above. Whether accidentally or on purpose, though, these measures do not really tell us very much.

For example, under the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, there is an "outcome/impact" measure for the "Percent of Identified Noncompliant Sites and Facilities for Which Appropriate Action Is Taken." This measure, a goal really, is set at 85 percent. Why is it not 100 percent? Or how about the "Percent of Inspected or Investigated Air Sites in Compliance," with a goal of 98 percent. While it is an admirable goal to have all air sites in compliance, could not this measure create a perverse incentive to inspect and investigate sites in compliance and ignore violators?

In the budget, no history or context is given to any of the outcome and efficiency measures. Central missions and goals go unstated. Ultimate results seem, well, ultimately unimportant. This is true for all state

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agencies. It is only with rare exception that one can trace any specific program's expenditures back even five years (though never in the budget and only with a great deal of sleuthing), much less gauge its successes or failures.

There is more information available in agencies' Legislative Appropriations Requests, but few of these are available online. What's more, the history these documents do give leaves a gap in every agency's actual spending history because of the way these standardized documents are arranged.

Studying the state's budget and trying to get answers to basic questions is a little like a physicist studying the big bang. One answer seems only to lead to a half dozen more questions.

But the Texas state budget is not the cosmos.

Currently, individual programs are almost impossible to identify in the state budget. That must be changed, making it more accessible and useful. Additionally, generally accessible documents clearly detailing the strategic plans for each program should be produced, including sound measures for defining success at the end of each year and over the course of the program.

Taxpayers need to know what is really being accomplished with their money. If such answers cannot be had, then that taxpayers' money should stay with the taxpayers.