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by Benita Dodd

Transparency is the ticket

Internet-savvy bank customers in Georgia can go online and check and balance their accounts from the comfort of their home, even at 2 in the morning. But let that same taxpayer be curious at 10 a.m. about how his taxes are being spent in Georgia, and he'd have a tough time finding out.

Transparency legislation that passed the Georgia House and Senate unanimously could soon help.

The Transparency in Government Act will establish a free, searchable Web site that contains state expenditures, financial and performance audits, contracts, payments to vendors and data on personnel.

The personnel data will include boards, commissions, every state authority, every university or college in the University System of Georgia and every local board of education.

As one of the best managed states in the nation, producing this information should not only be easy, but also very inexpensive thanks to modern technology.

As we tend to do with physicians, Georgians trust in government, take its word unquestioningly and worry that it's betrayal to seek a second opinion. It's wiser to "Trust, but verify." It's not just that taxpayers have a right to know how their hard-earned dollars are spent, and where. Millions of taxpayers, from housewives to CEOs to students of economics have ideas on how to implement savings in government, and some are worth considering. Ensuring employee integrity is tough when accountability isn't expected and huge sums of money are involved, as the recently revealed misspending with state purchase cards demonstrates. Transparency encourages agency, employee and taxpayer responsibility.

The awakening in transparency trailblazer Texas, which prides itself as a fiscally conservative, low-tax state, came after a 35 percent increase in state spending since 2003. (Texas had erased a 2003 budget shortfall of \$10 billion by cutting spending rather than raising taxes.)

By 2005, with the urging of state fiscal conservative groups, including the Texas Public Policy Foundation - that state's version of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation - voluntary transparency efforts began through the Office of the Governor and the Texas Education Agency. State Comptroller Susan Combs posted her office's spending down to the penny within days of taking office and the governor's committed leadership laid the groundwork for enacting transparency legislation.

Texas's goal was to make all state expenditures, contracts and grants accessible to the public online in plain English. It would need to be displayed per agency and searchable, allowing for cost comparisons and accountability. The bipartisan legislation was adopted and the state comptroller's fiscal note reported no fiscal impact on the state budget for the total transparency package.

The Office of the Comptroller then had to compile and present the information through the online database.

The state had already begun the process of bringing the various state agencies into a uniform account coding system. The transparency law accelerated the process. The database, "Where the Money Goes," went live on Oct. 1, 2007, on the Comptroller's "Window on State Government" Web site.

With much of the spending growth occurring at the local level, fiscal conservative groups in Texas are now calling for the transparency requirements to be extended to counties, cities, school districts, special taxing districts and other quasi-government entities. School districts are publishing their check registers online, so that the public can see purchases from pencils to 'puters.

So, why school districts? Cover of darkness encourages wrongdoing: Over \$13,000 of student money was spent on food, liquor and entertainment, including a strip club, by two after-school program employees in Washington, D.C. Texas' example inspired Bill Chappell, the former publisher of the Carroll Star News and current Carroll County Commission chairman, plans "to be the first in the state of Georgia to follow suit." To that end, his comptroller is "investigating the details on software and what we need to do to accomplish this," he told his former newspaper.

A lack of accountability and oversight is evident at the state Department of Transportation. Not only does it have one of the less informative Web sites among Georgia government agencies, but it reported this week that for years the agency authorized projects it hasn't yet delivered or even contracted out. Governor Sonny Perdue's Fast Forward program is affected. Even contingencies weren't budgeted into project cost estimates: the cost of utilities, project changes or cost overruns.

Lambasting transparency efforts as a conspiracy to embarrass government officials is shortsighted. It's a way for every taxpayer to ensure that programs are being funded appropriately; that costly duplication and redundancy are not burdening agencies and that efficiency and effectiveness are the goals of government. Taxpayers need to demand that government expenditures be freed from the filing cabinets and released into sunlight.

Brooke Rollins of the Texas Public Policy Foundation and Michael Quinn Sullivan of Texans for Fiscal Responsibility contributed to this commentary by Benita M. Dodd, vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation. The Georgia Public Policy Foundation is an independent think tank that proposes practical, market-oriented approaches to public policy to improve the lives of Georgians. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before the U.S. Congress or the Georgia Legislature.

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