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Editorials

Posted on Tuesday, July 15, 2008

Steady Progress Seen in Open Government

The cause of open and transparent government is advancing, the Texas Public Policy Center's Talmadge Heflin reports.

"At every level of Texas government, nonpartisan efforts for greater transparency and accountability are gaining ground," Heflin says in a new report. "The public's desire for open government and heightened public scrutiny has motivated our legislature to adopt a series of bold reforms."



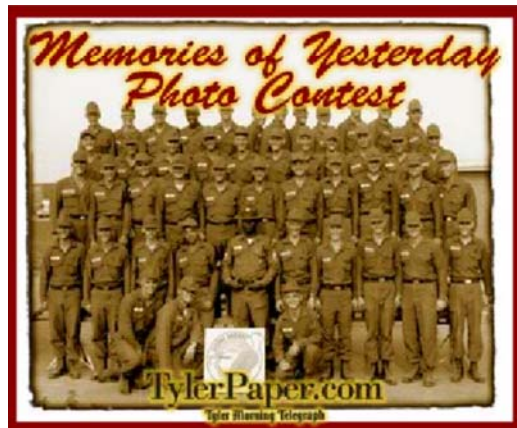
The state's entire budget is now online, in a user-friendly format, there's video streaming of the Legislature's proceedings, and Austin has passed bills to encourage accountability, he says.

"Together, these measures have helped to bridge the gap between taxpayers and every level of government," Heflin says.

A key measure came in 2005, when Gov. Rick Perry signed an executive order requiring school districts to post their check registers online if they failed to meet spending criteria.

"Dubbed 'the 65 percent initiative,' the order mandated districts to commit at least 65 percent of their funding to classroom related expenditures so that administrative costs could be reduced," Heflin explains.

That year also saw the passage of the important "Truth in Taxation" bill.



"Truth in Taxation offers taxpayers several major local government reforms, including stringent property tax increase requirements, lowered thresholds for tax rollback elections, and raised barriers against runaway increases in local government budgets without a public hearing or voter approval," Heflin says. "These measures have helped to craft an environment of greater government accountability in spending."

More recent advances have come from the office of Texas Comptroller Susan Combs.

"Comptroller Combs has converted the state's massive budget into a user-friendly package with the introduction of 'Where the Money Goes.' As one of the first of its kind in the country, the Web site has received enormous attention and praise — from both critics and admirers," Heflin observes.

The "Where the Money Goes" project saved taxpayers money from the outset.

"The application only cost the state \$310,000 to develop, but by consolidating various state contracts in Texas government, Ms. Combs has already saved \$2.3 million in her agency alone," Heflin says.

His own Texas Public Policy Foundation is doing its part, as well. Last week, the Foundation launched the Texas Budget Source Web site at www.texasbudgetsource.com. This site supplements "Where the Money Goes" with detailed budget analysis of state expenditures going back for 20 years.

"While Texas taxpayers are busy earning a living, taking care of their families, and paying their taxes, they deserve to know that their tax dollars are being used judiciously by the state and local governments that are spending them," Heflin says. "With these tools in the hands of taxpayers, elected officials in all levels of government should quickly get the message: 'If you can't defend it, don't spend it!'"

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