

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

## Checks and balances

**By: Abhinav Kumar**

**Posted: 7/18/08**

Historically, July 8 ranks as a pretty important day. Some of us remember it as the day Prince Charles Ndizi of Burundi took over his father's throne in 1966. Others may recall it as the day the Chippewa tribe let go of land in Ontario to the Brits in 1822. And who could forget the Dano-Norwegians' (under the command of Vice-Admiral Tordenskjold, of course) victory against the Swedes in 1716? But before you lean back and reminisce about all the July 8's of past, don't forget to pay tribute to this year's July 8. On the date this year, the nonprofit Texas Public Policy Foundation unveiled a Web site that is sure to give people an edge over big government bureaucrats and politicians.

The site, [TexasBudgetSource.org](http://TexasBudgetSource.org), offers a wealth of information about the accounting of state and local governments and school districts. With the goal of bringing more transparency to government, the site also provides user-friendly consolidation - a one-stop source for spending records from across the state.

Displayed prominently in the upper right-hand corner is a nifty, up-to-the-minute "Spend-O-Meter." As of now, the state has already spent over \$66.9 billion of our money. More than giving a lump sum, the site also breaks down spending into appropriated groups (education, public safety, health and human services, etc.) and displays information from up to 10 years ago for comparison.

[TexasBudgetSource](http://TexasBudgetSource.org) largely follows in the footsteps of another Web site, headed by Susan Combs, the state's Comptroller of Public Accounts. Combs is a rare public official who spearheads government transparency initiatives. After she assumed office in 2007, she created her site - *Where the Money Goes* - to post state agencies' expenses online "down to the pencil."

Bringing the need for transparency from statewide organizations down to local government specifically, *The Houston Chronicle* last week published its own government expenditure tracking measure as well. Though not quite as comprehensive as the other two sites, the *Chronicle* provides a searchable payroll database for seven Houston government organizations, including Houston ISD and the city of Houston. A quick search can tell you that Houston's police chief earns nearly \$200,000 a year.

Austin's commitment, however, to online government transparency is a bit mediocre. All the information is available - just not at the same time and not in the same place. The city of Austin Web site provides downloadable PDF files, but beyond these lengthy, insider-oriented, fourth-grade PowerPoint presentations, there is no easy way to analyze Austin's local government spending. If there was, people may realize that the city is projected to have at least a \$20 million deficit for the upcoming fiscal year.

Combs says she provides her state agency spending site at no cost to taxpayers, according to an interview on [TexasBudgetSource](http://TexasBudgetSource.org). But even if cost is an issue for making Austin's budgets user-friendly, the city could have taken the money and time spent on its ridiculous "climate protection" Web site (complete with carbon calculator!) and instead used it to make information on spending more readily available.

At least most people only have to worry about state and city expenses. Unfortunately for students, transparency gets even worse at the University level. One call to the Student Government office will reveal that specific, appropriated spending information of its \$132,192 budget is not available at all online. Your tuition money could be going to help fund an organization you do not even agree with, such as University Democrats or the Young Conservatives of Texas.

In the end, politicians and bureaucrats (and SG officers) get too much of the blame. Sure, they may be manipulative, powerless cogs in someone else's machine, but they only screw around with our money because we let it happen. Hopefully this trend of online government transparency will continue, but it's up to us to keep their spending in check.

*Kumar is a Business Honors and supply chain management senior.*

---

© Copyright 2008 The Daily Texan