

Column - Talmadge Heflin: Shine the light on state government

Opinion

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AUSTIN - At every level of Texas government, non-partisan efforts for greater transparency and accountability are gaining ground. The public's desire for open government and heightened public scrutiny has motivated our legislature to adopt a series of bold reforms.

Recent measures to increase transparency in Texas government have included posting state budget information online in a user-friendly format, streaming video of live House and Senate proceedings, passage of multiple bills related to transparency and accountability and encouraging greater civic participation.

These measures have helped to bridge the gap between taxpayers and every level of government.

At the school district level, Gov. Rick Perry signed an executive order in 2005 requiring school districts to post their check registers online if they failed to meet certain 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.

The order further instructed the Texas Education Agency to design a more accurate financial reporting system.

The combination of these transparency initiatives has equipped taxpayers to fight waste, fraud, and abuse in education spending by easily allowing taxpayers to see where their money is going.

At the local level, Texas legislators, working in tandem with the governor's office, enacted the "Truth-in-Taxation" bill in 2005. TNT 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.

These measures have helped to craft an environment of greater government accountability in spending.

At the state level, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts Susan Combs has converted the state's massive budget into a user-friendly package with the introduction of "Where the Money Goes." The site is a comprehensive look at state spending over the last several fiscal years. As one of the first of its kind in the country, the website has received enormous attention and praise - from both critics and admirers.

Efforts to replicate the Web site in other states have met with protests.

Such critics fail to acknowledge that "Where the Money Goes" actually saved the state millions of dollars in just its first year. The application only cost the state \$310,000 to develop, but by consolidating various state contracts in Texas government, Combs has already saved \$2.3 million in her agency alone.

And now non-profit organizations are amplifying the state and local government efforts to promote transparency in government spending.

This week, the Texas Public Policy Foundation launched a new Web site, www.TexasBudgetSource.com.

Texas Budget Source supplements "Where the Money Goes" with detailed budget analysis of state expenditures over the past 20 years, links to the online check registers of more than 150 Texas school districts, lists of counties and cities that have posted their budget information online, and more.

While Texas taxpayers are busy earning a living 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. [TexasBudgetSource.com](http://www.TexasBudgetSource.com) empowers more of Texas' 24.1 million residents to become taxpayer watchdogs, making government more transparent and accountable for its spending and tax practices.

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!"

Talmadge Heflin is director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Heflin served 11 terms in the Texas House of Representatives.

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