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Good governance demands transparency

James Quintero - Special to the Express-News

James Russell Wiggins, the late editor of the Washington Post, once said that “the more that government becomes secret, the less it remains free.” Thankfully, Texas is leading the way towards opening the workings of government, particularly how it spends your tax dollars.

Last month, Collin County unveiled the Financial Transparency Project, becoming the first county in American history to post its finances online. Praised by local taxpayers and media, the county's website works to de-mystify how tax dollars are being spent.

Financial transparency in Collin County goes well beyond the posting of county expenditures. The site also features five-year tax and expenditure summaries, budget analyses, quarterly statistical data and a citizens report. Collin County's transparency project takes an enormous first step in the right direction.

And earlier this month, Smith County commissioners voted unanimously to open the county checkbook to public scrutiny.

The commissioners' courts in Collin and Smith Counties have set an outstanding example for the other 252 Texas counties.

Not to be outdone, state officials at the Legislative Budget Board (LBB) also announced their own transparency initiative. Taxpayers now can see each agency's Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR) as they are submitted by going to the LBB's Web site.

While LARs have long been available to the public, Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, deserves credit for convincing the board that taxpayers should be able to find these public documents on a single page rather than having to divine their location on each individual agency's Web site.

A central location allows taxpayers to easily review the financial demands made by each agency and how the agency intends to use taxpayer funds.

Interested taxpayers should contact their legislators after reviewing an agency's LAR and offer recommendations to reduce the cost of government.

State and local government efforts to enhance transparency have been impressive, but not every branch of Texas government is welcoming the trend.

Too many school districts have been loath to open up their “fiefdoms” for taxpayer scrutiny despite their demands for more tax dollars.

One need look no further than Beaumont Independent School District (BISD) for an example. Last November, BISD Superintendent Carrol Thomas made repeated promises that the district would become more open and responsive to taxpayers after voters approved a \$389 million bond initiative.

Recent reports from the Beaumont Examiner may shed light on why the district is stonewalling repeated taxpayer requests for documents protected under the Freedom of Information Act.

According to the Examiner, BISS bids to help construct three new elementary schools were mired in controversy.

Such instances serve as a reminder that although Texans have made progress in the fight against government waste, corruption and abuse through the use of financial transparency, we still have much to accomplish.

Armed with 21st century technology, the time has come for every level of Texas government to fully reveal itself to those footing the bill.

Taxpayers deserve, and should demand, more authority in how government spends tax dollars.

Only then can we return the reins of power back to rightful owner: the taxpayer.

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