

# Coalition Using New Media To Spur Govt. Accountability

By Joshua Culling

A coalition of Washington, DC-based center-right organizations has embraced new media technologies to advance their message with the creation of a new Web site, Statebooks.org.

Statebooks.org uses Twitter, a "microblogging" social-networking site, to aggregate state economic and fiscal policy news and commentary on one simple Web page. Twitter users type a 140-character description of a piece of news, link to it, and punctuate their "tweet" with the hashtag "#statebooks."

Using a hashtag has the effect of "bookmarking" a tweet, and in the case of "#statebooks" it automatically sends the post to statebooks.org, where users can browse concise chunks of information from all 50 states. The site also includes ready-made HTML code for visitors to embed the live feed on their own Web site or blog.

The site began through collaboration between the National Taxpayers Union and Americans for Tax Reform and soon spread to activists and state-level think tanks across the country. State organizations currently using "#statebooks" include the Texas Public Policy Foundation, Virginia's Tertium Quids, North Carolina's John Locke Foundation, and Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Foundation, among a host of others.

## Hoping to Boost Transparency

In an effort to expand transparency and accountability in government, statebooks.org organizers hope to get more policymakers involved in the venture. Likely 2010 Ohio Republican gubernatorial candidate John Kasich has used "#statebooks" to communicate his plan for tax reform in the state, recently posting his response to current Gov. Ted Strickland's State of the State address on the site. Former Iowa state representative Jamie Van Fossen continues to furnish expert updates on legislative proceedings in his state using "#statebooks."

One benefit of Twitter, the site's organizers say, is that it provides "live" coverage and can be updated instantly from anywhere in the country by computer or cell phone. Eventually, statebooks.org's creators hope to have members of every state legislature in the country "tweeting" from the floor or in committee, giving taxpayers access

to proceedings in real time.

Such accessibility will allow voters to hold elected officials accountable by peeling away a layer of the information barrier between citizens and the legislative process.

## Introducing to Leaders

Eventually statebooks.org may expand to include different sites for each of the 50 states. The current focus is on introducing legislators and policy leaders to Twitter and "#statebooks" and persuading them to embrace this new method of communication.

With the vast majority of states facing serious budget deficits, statebooks.org encourages widespread participation in conversations about government spending, taxation, and transparency. The technology allows lawmakers to share their observations and analyses directly with constituents and for voters to gain facts straight from the source instead of filtered through the media.

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# New York Governor Unveils Beverage Tax

By John W. Skorburg

Among scores of tax and fee hikes proposed by New York Gov. David A. Paterson (D) is one he says will fight obesity: a tax on sugared soft drinks.

His five-point plan, unveiled in January, includes a ban on "junk" food sales in state schools and "placing a tax on sugared beverages like soda." Diet drinks would not be assessed the tax.

"In 1970, the average New Yorker drank the equivalent of about five cans of soda a week. Today, the average New Yorker drinks the equivalent of 11 cans a week," the governor said in a press statement. Paterson estimates "an 18 percent tax on these beverages will reduce consumption by 5 percent," while sending big money into the state's coffers.

## Product Singled Out

The Business Council of New York State opposes the tax.

"The 'soda tax' is nothing but a new sales tax that singles out one product category. Singling out one beverage or food product for higher taxes makes no sense," said Kenneth Adams, president and CEO of The Business Council.

The estimated \$404 million the tax would raise annually could help close the current state budget deficit, but the governor instead says the money "will go toward funding public health programs, including obesity prevention programs, across New York State."

"This is purely a money grab, and at the worst time for middle-class families," said Craig Stevens, vice president of communications for the American Beverage Association, another

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**KENNETH ADAMS  
PRESIDENT AND CEO  
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industry organization opposed to the new tax.

## Public Strongly Opposed

Polls taken in New York show strong opposition to the soda tax idea.

A Quinnipiac University poll showed 60 percent of New Yorkers oppose such a tax, while 37 percent support it. The American Cancer Society and American Diabetes Association, among other groups, support the proposal.

Stevens noted a nationwide Rasmussen Reports survey showed 70 percent of Americans oppose a national tax on non-diet soft drinks, while only 18 percent support the idea of a tax like the one proposed by Paterson.

In his State of the State Address, Paterson acknowledged New York's budget deficit "has been growing by millions of dollars a day." A decision on the state budget is expected by April 1, the beginning of the new fiscal year.

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