

Star-Telegram

Texas transit agencies should open their books

Posted Sunday, Jun. 27, 2010

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Special to the Star-Telegram

Last year, Texas' metropolitan transit authorities spent more than \$4 billion in transportation tax money. If you're curious to know why, how or on what, good luck.

Despite all the open-government reforms that have taken root in Texas the past several years, most of Texas' transit authorities still don't provide the public with basic spending information online, such as budgets, check registers and financial reports.

Of the state's 10 transit authorities, just six post their budgets on their own websites, and six do likewise with financial statements. None post a check register online. The Fort Worth Transportation Authority, or the T, Lubbock's Citibus and Laredo's El Metro do none of the above.

That this level of obscurity exists in today's digital world is unacceptable -- especially considering that some transit authorities have bigger budgets than some small states.

But it is even worse considering how other Texas local governments have embraced transparency.

The Texas Comptroller's Leadership Circle program is a statewide initiative that recognizes local governments for their transparency efforts.

The program has recognized 55 cities for their open-government efforts, along with 30 counties, 55 school districts, two municipal utility districts, one river authority -- and zero transit authorities.

With the public largely in the dark about how transit authorities spend billions of dollars every year and a seemingly cavalier attitude among local transportation officials toward basic concept of financial transparency, the time has come for the Legislature to step up to the plate and protect taxpayers.

During the next session, lawmakers should pass legislation requiring all state transit authorities to adopt basic, uniform transparency measures. Ideally, they would require transit authorities to prominently post three to five years' worth of budget information, make available three to five years' worth of financial statements and post a check register online that is updated at least monthly.

The information should be accurate and in a standard format that enables curious taxpayers to easily download and manipulate the data.

Perhaps the biggest gripe I hear from local transportation officials is that posting public information will cost their smaller, cash-strapped governments an arm and a leg. That is simply not true and, in fact, many times local governments end up saving money with their reforms.

For example, before Smith County implemented its transparency measures, the county auditor's office spent several thousand dollars each year printing and distributing about 100 copies of the budget. However, since the county switched from paper to online financial records, the county has saved money.

Another excuse I regularly hear is that posting all that data online will require more time and manpower than the local government has available. But that, too, has proved false.

Take Tyler, for example. When it added a weekly check register to its website in April 2009, it was "done in-house, by city staff, at no additional cost."

Or take the case of the Big Spring school district. Using existing staff, district employees have posted financial records online, needing "no more than two to three hours per month of staff time," said Sandra Waggoner, chief financial officer.

Transparency reforms have proved worthwhile endeavors for both the public and governmental entities. To have that kind of empirical evidence and still have transit authorities doing a lackluster job -- particularly with what some claim is a transportation funding crisis on the horizon -- is no longer acceptable.

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