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Transportation writer Michael Lindenberger, reporter Theodore Kim and editorial writer Rodger Jones cover the subject from tollways to traffic, roads to rail. They invite tips and feedback from decision-makers and commuters alike.

June 2010

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Guest blogger: Transparency needed from transit agencies



10:49 AM Wed, Jun 16, 2010 | Permalink | Yahoo! Buzz
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That's the message from guest blogger Talmadge Heflin, director of the Center for Fiscal Policy at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin. Heflin is a former chairman of the Texas House Appropriations Committee.

The fiscal practices of transit agencies has emerged as an issue in Austin as metro areas look for more money to fight traffic congestion, and part of the strategy is helping mass transit agencies add rail lines. Heflin's post:

Last year, Texas' metropolitan transit authorities (MTAs) spent more than \$4 billion of your transportation tax dollars. 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' MTAs 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 online and six do likewise with financial statements. None post a check register online. Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) deserves partial credit for posting budgets and financial statements, although it is labeled under "investor information." But the Fort Worth Transportation Authority ("The T"), Lubbock's Citibus, and Laredo's El Metro do none of the above on their own website.

That this level of obscurity exist 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 started embracing transparency.

The Texas Comptroller's Leadership Circle program is a statewide initiative that recognizes local governments for their transparency efforts. So far, the program has recognized 62 cities for their open-government efforts, along with 34 counties, 64 school districts, two municipal utility districts, one river authority - but no 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 towards basic concept of financial transparency, the time has come for the Legislature to protect taxpayers.

During the next legislative session, lawmakers should pass legislation requiring all of Texas' transit authorities to adopt basic, uniform transparency measures. Ideally, these would require MTAs 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. This information should also be accurate and in a standard format that enables 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. This is simply not true; many times, local governments end up saving money with these reforms.

Collin County, the best example of financial transparency at the county level, created a web page in 2008 that includes all three of its check registers, monthly utility costs, five-year spending trends, and a vast array of other information regarding county finances. County officials say that posting this information online has freed up their staff to do their main jobs thanks to fewer phone inquiries and open records requests.

Another excuse I regularly hear is that posting all that data online will require more time and manpower than what the local government has available. But this too has proven to be false.

When the city of Tyler added a weekly check register to its website in April 2009, it was "done in-house, by city staff, at no additional cost." Collin County's transparency project was also created and maintained within existing resources. Big Spring ISD posts its check registers online using "no more than two to three hours per month of staff time," according to Sandra Waggoner, the chief financial officer of the district.

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



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