

Creating a Free, Searchable Website of State Spending

Bringing sunshine to public spending

by Jason Mercier – Director, Center for Government Reform

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Introduction

At some point most citizens wonder, “Just how, when and where does government spend our tax dollars? What do our elected representatives want to accomplish when they spend public money, and what results are actually achieved?”

Considering Washington lawmakers will spend about \$71 billion over the next two years, these are basic questions to which any taxpayer should be able to get answers quickly and conveniently. This is especially true since modern technology makes accessing large amounts of information easier than ever. Unfortunately, the opportunity to learn these answers is currently limited and difficult to achieve.

The current lack of spending transparency is not the result of some deep Machiavellian conspiracy to hide budget information from the public. Instead it is simply a failure of elected officials to keep up with the times by providing taxpayers with a free, easy-to-use website where people can find these details.

A solution to this lack of budget transparency problem is available. Last year the federal government enacted a law that provides a roadmap for states on how to allow citizens to find out about government spending.

Creating a searchable budget website

Recently, President Bush recognized the federal government’s need to be more accountable to Americans for the nearly \$1 trillion Congress appropriates each year in discretionary spending. Last year he signed the bipartisan Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act. The Act was co-sponsored by senators Tom Coburn (R-OK) and Barack Obama (D-IL) and passed Congress unanimously.

The new law creates a free, easy-to-use, searchable, Google-type web site that allows citizens to track the recipients of all federal funds. The privacy of individuals is protected. For example, one cannot look up how much Social Security someone receives monthly.

According to the president, this budget database will enable citizens “to call up the name and location of entities receiving federal funds and will provide them with the purpose of the funding, the amount of the money provided, the agency providing the funding and other relevant information.”

Transparency reforms in other states

Recently the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a nonpartisan association of state legislators, adopted model legislation to implement state versions of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act. ALEC also adopted a model bill to require that the public have at least 72 hours to review tax and spending bills before they are voted on.

Many states are already moving forward with this type of reform. The following states have created some form of searchable budget websites for citizens:

- Hawaii
- Kansas
- Minnesota
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- Oklahoma
- South Carolina
- Texas

Similar proposals have been introduced as bills in the legislatures of other states, including Washington.

Washington representatives Mark Miloscia (D-30th District) and Rep. Dan Kristiansen (R-39th District) introduced HB 2342 last session, “to make the state budget information available to the public.” The bill would create a free, searchable website for use by the public and providing details about state spending and agency performance.

Last session legislators also introduced HB 1834, to create a budget “time out” before votes could occur on appropriations bill.

Current state of public budget information

So what budget tools are currently available for state taxpayers?

If you have the time and patience to read through hundreds of pages of budget bills and dig through numerous state websites and publications, you might actually find the spending and agency performance information you are looking for. But even if you think you have found the right page in the right report, reading and understanding what it says is an entirely different matter. For example, here is a typical page from the state’s current 2007-2009 budget:

2007-09 Washington State Budget

Total Budgeted Funds

TOTAL STATE

(Dollars in Thousands)

	Omnibus Operating Budget	Transportation Budget		Capital Budget New		Total
		Operating	Capital	Approps	Reapprops	
Legislative	170,750	1,595	0	1,100	0	173,445
Judicial	284,457	0	0	0	0	284,457
Governmental Operations	3,569,722	3,882	0	886,334	661,770	5,121,708
Human Services	24,186,777	0	0	301,625	267,163	24,755,565
Natural Resources	1,540,992	2,343	0	1,036,208	628,025	3,207,568
Transportation	169,985	2,075,814	4,884,268	5,352	2,980	7,138,399
Public Schools	15,070,666	0	0	964,994	369,826	16,405,486
Higher Education	9,282,202	0	0	1,065,889	414,233	10,762,324
Other Education	443,499	0	0	35,156	8,132	486,787
Special Appropriations	2,043,434	676,166	0	0	0	2,719,600
Statewide Total	56,762,484	2,759,800	4,884,268	4,296,658	2,352,129	71,055,339

If the state had a searchable budget website, rather than having to dig through thousands of pages of budget documents, each item in the table above could be linked to a plain-English explanation of what it means and further broken down by how the money is spent all the way to the program level. Performance information for the spending would also be included. That way, any citizen with internet access could go to a single source for the public spending information he is looking for.

Such websites are not merely theoretical. Texas and Missouri, as described below, already have such sites. Even in Washington one agency, the Department of General Administration, has created a searchable website showing its public contracts. Here is what it looks like.

The screenshot shows the 'Advanced contract search' page of the Washington State Department of General Administration. The page features a navigation menu with options like 'Home', 'Purchasing & Contracts', 'Doing business with the state', 'Construction & Public Works', 'Facility & Office Services', 'Travel, Cars & Parking', 'Visit the Capitol', and 'Surplus'. Below the navigation is a search bar and a 'Last update: 04/27/2007' timestamp. The main content area is divided into four sections:

- 1) Search Using a Keyword**: Includes a sub-instruction '(For example, you might enter "furniture" to find any contracts relating to furniture)', a 'Keyword:' input field, and a 'Search' button.
- 2) Enter the Contract Number:**: Includes a sub-instruction 'Note: You must enter all five characters of the contract number, e.g. 01002 instead of 1002', an input field, and a 'Find Contract' button.
- 3) Display All Contracts**: Includes a 'Sort Contracts by:' section with radio buttons for 'Title' (selected), 'Contract Number', and 'Vendor Name', and a 'Display Contracts' button.
- 4) Recently Expired Contracts**: Includes a sub-instruction 'These are contracts that have expired within the last 90 days.' and a 'Display Contracts' button.

General Administration's contract website allows users to search for state contracts by keyword, contract number, vendor and expired contracts.

Budget transparency reforms of note

The following are examples of the searchable budget websites and required spending information for the federal government, Texas and Missouri.

[Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act](#)

Cost: [\\$15 million \(2007-2011\)](#)

"The Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (FFATA) of 2006 asks the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to lead the development, by January 2008, of a single searchable website, accessible by the public for free that includes for each Federal award:

- the name of the entity receiving the award;
- the amount of the award;
- information on the award including transaction type, funding agency, etc;
- the location of the entity receiving the award;
- a unique identifier of the entity receiving the award.

What's the purpose of the new legislation?

To provide the public with information about how their tax dollars are spent. Citizens have a right and need to understand where tax dollars are spent. Collecting data about the various types of contracts, grants and loans in our government will provide a broader picture of and much needed transparency to the Federal spending processes. The ability to look at contracts, grants, loans, and other types of spending across many agencies, in greater detail, is a key ingredient to building public trust in government and credibility in the professionals who use these agreements."

Texas Searchable State Spending Database

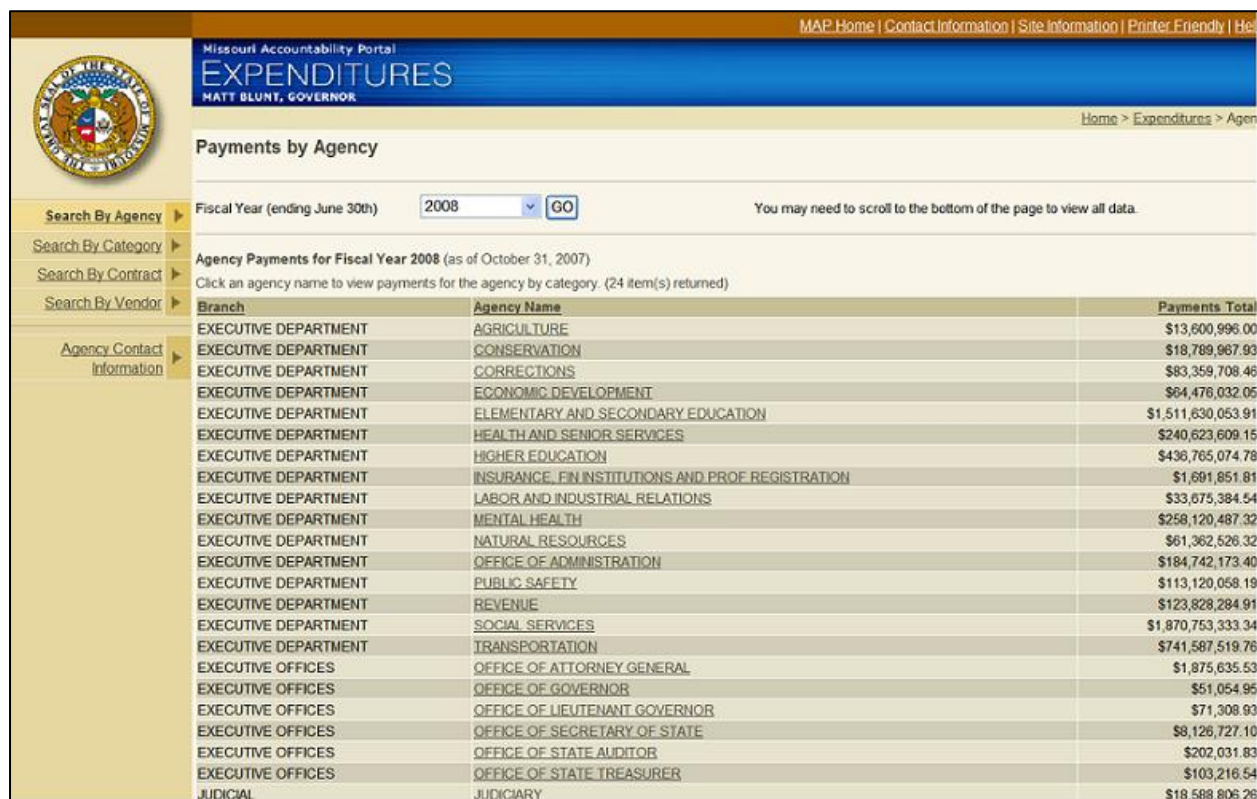
Cost: "No fiscal implication to the state is anticipated."

Texas State Expenditure Information by Category and Object Code		Page 1 of 1
Fiscal Year: 2007		
Expenditure Category	Expenditure Amount	
Capital Outlay	\$394,351,494.11	
Claims and Judgments	\$84,595,534.61	
Communications and Utilities	\$605,387,630.08	
Cost of Goods Sold	\$756,494,129.05	
Employee Benefits	\$5,755,767,008.44	
Highway Construction	\$5,661,407,145.05	
Interfund Transfers/Other	\$13,860,078,717.02	
Intergovernmental Payments	\$21,583,358,278.87	
Investments	\$2,955,163,063.40	
Lottery Winnings Paid	\$391,167,831.12	
Other Expenditures	\$2,345,754,798.03	
Payment of Interest-Debt Service	\$917,544,378.63	
Payment on Principal-Debt Service	\$5,753,955,521.60	
Printing and Reproduction	\$61,773,204.41	
Professional Service and Fees	\$1,960,613,659.07	
Public Assistance Payments	\$26,137,770,454.40	
Rentals and Leases	\$231,115,824.78	
Repairs and Maintenance	\$572,363,877.97	
Salaries and Wages	\$9,357,362,216.47	
Supplies and Materials	\$822,547,166.77	
Travel	\$136,560,442.02	
Total	\$100,345,132,375.90	

“By October 1, 2007, the comptroller of public accounts (comptroller) is required to establish and post on the Internet a database of state expenditures, including contracts and grants, that is electronically searchable by the public. The database is to include the amount, date, payor, and payee of expenditures; and a listing of state expenditures by object of expense with links to the warrant or check register level and, to the extent maintained by state agency accounting systems in a reportable format, class and item levels. The comptroller, to the extent possible, is to present information in the database established under this section in a manner that is searchable and intuitive to users. The comptroller is to enhance and organize the presentation of the information through the use of graphical representations, such as pie charts, as the comptroller considers appropriate. The database is required at the minimum to allow users to search and aggregate state funding by any element of the information; ascertain through a single search the total amount of state funding awarded to a person by a state agency; and download information yielded by a search of the database.”

Missouri Accountability Portal

Cost: Within existing resources



Missouri Accountability Portal
EXPENDITURES
MATT BLUNT, GOVERNOR

Home > Expenditures > Agen

Payments by Agency

Fiscal Year (ending June 30th) You may need to scroll to the bottom of the page to view all data.

Search By Agency ▶
Search By Category ▶
Search By Contract ▶
Search By Vendor ▶

Agency Payments for Fiscal Year 2008 (as of October 31, 2007)
Click an agency name to view payments for the agency by category. (24 item(s) returned)

Branch	Agency Name	Payments Total
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	AGRICULTURE	\$13,600,996.00
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	CONSERVATION	\$18,769,987.93
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	CORRECTIONS	\$83,359,708.46
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	\$64,476,032.05
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION	\$1,511,630,053.91
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	HEALTH AND SENIOR SERVICES	\$240,623,609.15
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	HIGHER EDUCATION	\$436,765,074.78
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	INSURANCE, FIN INSTITUTIONS AND PROF REGISTRATION	\$1,691,851.81
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	LABOR AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS	\$33,675,384.54
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	MENTAL HEALTH	\$258,120,487.32
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	NATURAL RESOURCES	\$61,362,526.32
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATION	\$184,742,173.40
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	PUBLIC SAFETY	\$113,120,058.19
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	REVENUE	\$123,828,284.91
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	SOCIAL SERVICES	\$1,870,753,333.34
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT	TRANSPORTATION	\$741,587,519.76
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF ATTORNEY GENERAL	\$1,875,635.53
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF GOVERNOR	\$51,054.95
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR	\$71,308.93
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF SECRETARY OF STATE	\$8,126,727.10
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF STATE AUDITOR	\$202,031.83
EXECUTIVE OFFICES	OFFICE OF STATE TREASURER	\$103,216.54
JUDICIAL	JUDICIARY	\$18,588,806.26

“As of July 11, 2007, the Commissioner of Administration shall establish the Missouri Accountability Portal as a free, internet-based tool allowing citizens to demand fiscal discipline and responsibility.

The Missouri Accountability Portal shall be an easy-to-search database of financial transactions related to the purchase of goods and services and the distribution of funds for state programs.

The Missouri Accountability Portal shall be updated each state business day and maintained as the primary source of information about the activity of Missouri’s government.”

Conclusion

A free searchable budget transparency website will not cure all budget problems, but it would go a long way toward preventing waste and improving government performance.

Thomas Jefferson knew this long before the advent of the internet. In 1802 he wrote,

“We might hope to see the finances of the Union as clear and intelligible as a merchant’s books, so that every member of Congress and every man of any mind in the Union should be able to comprehend them, to investigate abuses, and consequently to control them.”¹

Enacting a comprehensive searchable budget website and a budget “time out” period would also help to fulfill the expectation of the people expressed by the preamble to our state’s open government law:

“The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies that serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may maintain control over the instruments that they have created.” Revised Code of Washington 42.56.030

Based on the experiences of other states, implementing this reform would not be expensive, and cost should not dissuade elected officials from moving forward with it. Improving citizen access to information about public spending will not only help improve the budget decision making process of elected officials, but also help connect taxpayers with the spending decisions being made on their behalf. This reform is a win-win for everyone, except possibly for those who fear something embarrassing about public spending might be revealed.

Jason Mercier is director of WPC’s Center for Government Reform. Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan public policy research organization in Seattle and Olympia. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information contact WPC at 206-937-9691 or online at www.washingtonpolicy.org.

¹ Letter to Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, 1802.