

Independent, principled state policy fostering limited and responsible government, free enterprise, and a robust civil society.

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A Vision for Transparency - Summary*

This paper lays out an argument why government transparency is necessary and important, why government, not private entities, should be legally obligated to provide the information, and a detailed vision for what basic government transparency should look like.

Crucial Information that Every Citizen Should Be Able to Access

Every citizen should have ready access to the following information through a state-maintained website usable free-of-charge:

- A list of every government that presides over that citizen's address, including enterprise entities such as electric co-ops, and rural water districts,
- Readily available standardized basic information about every single governmental entity in the list of governments,
- Every single payment of funds from each government's coffers,
- A listing of each government's assets, updated on a reasonable periodic basis,
- Every single non-tax revenue payment made to each government entity.

The state should maintain a website that provides the information contained in the first bullet above, with links to standardized web-based information described by the other bullets provided by each individual governmental entity, including the state and its agencies, and all local governments. A citizen should be able to access a state-maintained website, type in an address, and obtain a list of all governmental entities that have independent decision-making bodies that govern over that address.

Basic Governance Information

- For states and cities, a list of independent policy-making offices/entities/agencies including governor, legislature, secretary of state, agriculture commissioner, etc. for the state; mayor/city council, zoning board, TIF boards, etc. for cities,
- For every entity:
 - Name and contact information of every policy-making

- official, preferably both e-mail and phone (legally, there should be no exceptions for contact information),
- How each official obtained office – whether elected or appointed; if appointed, by whom,
- When each official first took office and the date of the end of the current term,
- Election dates applicable to the entity over the next two years with special attention for called elections,
- Taxes for which the entity is responsible and current tax rates,
- Links to statutes/rules/ordinances for which the entity is responsible,
- Links to expenditure/asset/revenue information (described below),
- Links to websites maintained by the entity.

Spending: The Government's Check Register

An investigator (taxpayer, journalist, accountant, or paid researcher) really only needs three basic pieces of information for each transaction. These include:

- 1 Who got paid,
- 2 How much was paid,
- 3 What the expenditure was for (not just object, function, and fund codes, but a memo line, too).

Government Assets

Every government asset above a minimum threshold should be identified, quantified as necessary, and listed with its initial purchase price for perusal by the citizenry.

Non-tax Revenues

Government runs a number of self-funded, or nearly self-funded enterprises, including sanitation (garbage) service, water service, sewer service, parks service, hunting license service, occupational licensing service, hospitals, auto licensing, and the list goes on. Many revenue transactions occur that do not represent taxation. Taxpayers deserve to know they are all be charged and treated equally.

What of Other Information?

Contracts are another target of transparency advocates.

Subsidies and special tax breaks, especially those granted in the name of economic development, have been particularly targeted, and deserve special attention.

Conclusion

With the traditional press in decline, we all the more urgently must make transparency work as well as it possibly can. We have to be selective about what specific information is to be made available, taking care to make it available in a way that it can actually be read and analyzed effectively. Otherwise, the sheer volume of information, along with useless drivel, can so camouflage waste, fraud and abuse that it is hidden in plain sight. The vision for transparency presented in this paper would bring government's conduct into the light of day in a way that would enable meaningful public oversight so that citizens would finally have a chance "to investigate abuses, and consequently to control them" (T. Jefferson).