

Government Transparency

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 control them.

– Thomas Jefferson

Citizens need to be educated in matters of public policy in order to hold elected leaders accountable, especially in the case of the public treasury. When government is transparent and taxpayers and the media are able to easily obtain North Dakota's budget, they are better able to draw conclusions based on the data.

Unfortunately, the amendment was later stripped from the bill. Such a bill would have gone far in creating a more open government, but the North Dakota Senate voted it down.

The government transparency movement is sweeping the country. In 2007, governors in Texas, Florida, and Missouri made government transparency one of their top priorities or issued executive orders to implement more transparency.⁵⁴

Recommendation: Shine light on North Dakota's budget. All government agencies should put their detailed budgets on easily searchable websites.

Bringing Government into the 21st Century

Everyone supports government transparency. The question is, to what extent is state government willing to provide it? According to Americans for Tax Reform, in 2007, a bill in the North Dakota Legislature "passed the House of Representatives containing an important passage relating to transparency for government purchase cards,"

*The office of management and budget shall develop and operate a searchable website or on the office's website provide a link to a searchable website accessible to the public at no cost to the user which lists, and updates monthly, each purchase made by a state agency through the use of a purchasing card. Each purchase listed must include the recipient of the funds, the amount of the purchase, the agency making the purchase, and any other information required by the office of management and budget.*⁵³

Other states that have moved legislatively toward a more open government include Kansas, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Texas, Minnesota, Kentucky, New Mexico, Maryland, Florida, Georgia, Colorado, Washington, Connecticut, Tennessee, and Louisiana.⁵⁵

Government transparency is becoming a big issue around the country, and North Dakota needs to become a strong partner in this trend.

For example, the property tax debate is complex. Without knowing how much local governments are spending on which programs, it is nearly impossible to have educated discussions. It is difficult to find good solutions.

With record levels of education funding, where is the current funding being spent? Why aren't taxpayers seeing results in improved student learning?

The best way for the electorate to determine how to fix the problem of escalating property taxes is for them to strip politics from the matter. Information is the key.

Sunshine on Schools

When people are able to sit at their home computers and dig deeply into their school district's budget, they get a sense of the district's financial situation without having politicians tell them what to think. Wasteful spending is exposed.

With that in mind, the North Dakota Policy Council launched Sunshine on Schools in June 2007.

The Sunshine on Schools website contains budget and education data from all K-12 schools in North Dakota. People can have an honest debate about property taxes only when they have the tools to do the research themselves. By sifting through the political rhetoric, voters have a better understanding of how their schools spend their money and then are better equipped intellectually to tackle the issue of property taxes.

The North Dakota Education Association constantly berates the state for having low teacher salaries. With Sunshine on Schools, citizens are able to see how much each teacher is actually making. Then they can judge for themselves if teachers are adequately paid.

Furthermore, school administrators, school board members, and other elected officials are able to use this tool. Because Sunshine on Schools allows the user to compare a school to several others on the computer screen at the same time, officials who guide spending have a better understanding of how the money is being spent. Perhaps the website will spawn a whole new group of local leaders to run for public office on a platform of government transparency.

Sure, school budgets are already public information. But, who has the time to contact school officials, obtain the correct documents, and then scour through page after page of numbers? By displaying the data in an online easy-to-read format, more people will be able to examine more information more quickly than ever before. More people than ever have a home computer with the internet. It is time to bring the government into the 21st century.

The support for Sunshine on Schools has been fantastic. *Walsh County Record* editor Todd Morgan wrote, "I [applaud the NDPC] for trying to hold school districts accountable to the taxpayer."⁵⁶

Government transparency needs to spread throughout government. Applying the principles of Sunshine on Schools to every other government agency, state and local, will give leaders and voters the opportunity to see exactly what their government is doing and how they are spending taxpayer dollars. Voters will have a better understanding of public policy issues.

Good government depends on transparent government.



www.sunshineonschools.org