



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

Youngstown Vindicator
By Peter H. Milliken
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YOUNGSTOWN

State Treasurer Josh Mandel praised Mahoning County officials for being leaders, not followers, in joining his OhioCheckbook.com initiative to promote transparency and accountability in government.

Mahoning will be the first Ohio county to join the Internet-based system to provide financial information to taxpayers, county Auditor Ralph T. Meacham said Tuesday.

"What you're going to see is dominoes fall all across the state because of leadership from counties like Mahoning County," Mandel said, referring to acceptance by other counties of his invitation to join the checkbook initiative.

Mandel appeared at a news conference with Meacham and the commissioners. In the audience were other county elected officials and many members of the auditor's office staff.

On Dec. 2, Mandel launched the state's checkbook website, where citizens can see every state government expenditure.

Mahoning expenditures soon will be on the checkbook database, Meacham said.

In a separate statement, State Auditor Dave Yost praised Mandel, Meacham and the commissioners "for standing up for the people."

"Mahoning County should be proud to be at the front of the line," Yost added.

Mandel and Meacham said the project, however, shouldn't be rushed.

"I'd rather have this done well than done quickly. Accuracy is paramount when it comes to getting this information online," Mandel said.

"We're going to walk to a solution. We're not going to run there. We're going to get this up. We're going to get it right. Good is better than fast," Meacham said.

"A lot of times, in the summer, things slow down with IT, so, if we can make it a priority to get it done this summer, we'll do it this summer," Jacob Williams, the county's information-technology director, said of the county's checkbook participation.

"We're still waiting on specifications from the state as to format and how they will accept our data," Williams noted.

"It is our intent to brand this as a Mahoning County checkbook site and that it be a stand-alone site, leveraging the state's technology," he added.

"This is about a common cause, and this is about doing what is right. Whether you're Republican or Democrat, this is what we do for the taxpayers of this county," said Anthony Traficanti, chairman of the county commissioners.

Mandel, Yost and Meacham are Republicans; the three county commissioners are Democrats.

"We need the public trust. ... This is just another level of transparency. ... To keep that sales tax renewable, there has to be trust," said Sheriff Jerry Greene, referring to the 0.75 percent, five-year criminal-justice sales tax the voters narrowly passed in November.

As to whether the county checkbook will contain current payroll information concerning specific county employees and any raises and bonuses they receive, Audrey Tillis, county budget director, said, "Eventually, we would like to probably have some of that out there, but we want to take it step by step."

Mandel said all state employees' and public-school and state-university employees' salaries are on the state treasurer's website.



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"That actually preceded OhioCheckbook.com," he noted.

"We think this is a great tool for investigative journalists and also citizen watchdogs," Mandel said of the checkbook site.

By providing a readily-accessible online database, the checkbook site may reduce the number of public records requests made to local governments, Mandel said.

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