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STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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It's a mantra Ohioans have heard many times, but from our vantage point it never gets old: "I believe taxpayers have the right to know how their tax dollars are being spent."

Those are the words Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel uses in making his pitch to local governments and school districts for their participation in OhioCheckbook.com, the transparency initiative he launched a year ago.

To date, almost 400 of the 3,962 public entities have committed to join the movement that holds officeholders and others accountable to the taxpayers.

The ultimate goal is to have the financial transactions of every city, county, township, school district, library district and others online so Ohioans can access the information with a click of the mouse.

It was last December that Mandel unveiled OhioCheckbook.com, an easily searchable website that featured state revenue and expenses dating back to 2008.

"I believe taxpayers have a right to know how their tax money is being spent, and I'm doing this to empower the people to hold politicians and bureaucrats accountable," the state treasurer said at the time. "I subscribe to the notion that sunlight is the greatest disinfectant to government waste."

The online checkbook, which took two years to complete and cost \$814,000 to build, initially detailed more than \$400 billion in state spending from 2008 on – and featured more than 4 billion pieces of distinct spending information. The response from the public was phenomenal, especially when it came to taxpayers perusing the payrolls of departments and agencies.

That reaction from Ohioans prompted Mandel to expand the transparency push to include local governments and school districts. Thus today, the checkbook contains more than \$500 billion in public spending.

First among all counties

In April, the treasurer came to Youngstown to announce that Mahoning County government would be the first county operation to put its checkbook online via the state system. Commissioners Anthony Traficanti, Carol Rimedio-Righetti and David Ditzler, Auditor Ralph Meacham and others joined Mandel at the news conference.

"What you're going to see is dominoes fall all across the state because of the leadership from counties like Mahoning County," he said.

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Trumbull County government has followed suit.

Mandel's announcement was music to our ears because we have long demanded openness and accountability from local governments and school systems. Despite the straightforwardness of Ohio's public records and open meetings laws, there still are those in the public sector who drag their feet when information is sought by the press and public.

The online checkbook is a godsend for citizens interested in monitoring how their tax dollars are being spent.

On Dec. 2, Mandel returned to the Mahoning Valley to announce online partnerships with Youngstown and Mathews school districts and Austintown, Howland, Liberty, Milton and Bazetta townships.

In Mahoning, Trumbull and Columbiana counties, there are a total of 32 public entities that have joined the movement.

That said, the absence of Youngstown and Warren city governments from the list is noteworthy and troubling.

The outreach across the state began in April when Mandel sent a letter to 18,062 local government and school officials urging them to place their checkbook level data on OhioCheckbook.com.

There have been almost 400,000 searches on the site, which goes to show that Ohioans are hungry for unfiltered information.

Given this heightened public interest, we urge the Ohio Senate to follow the lead of the Ohio House and pass House Bill 46, which ensures that the transparency initiative will survive long after Mandel leaves the treasurer's office. Sponsors of the bill recently testified before the Senate Finance Committee, and we are confident the legislation will be reported out without delay.

The Republican leadership should quickly schedule a floor vote so Ohioans can rest assured that they will have easy access to the financial transactions of state and local governments, school districts and other public entities.

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