



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

By Robert Higgs | The Plain Dealer

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- A proposal to bolster transparency would let taxpayers track online every penny that Ohio's state government spends.

The plan, pitched by Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel and backed by legislation from Rep. Mike Dovilla, calls for the treasurer to maintain a database on his office's Internet site that would allow free access to the data.

"I believe transparency in government spending brings efficiency," Mandel said in an interview Wednesday. "By taking Ohio's checkbook and putting it on the Internet, it will essentially create an army of citizen auditors throughout the state."

As envisioned, the treasurer's staff, which already maintains searchable salary databases online for public school teachers and state employees, would be charged with handling the new data site.

Each expenditure made by state government through its dozens of departments and agencies, or by legislators and their staffs or other officeholders, would be posted to the site with information on the amount, the date it was made and the vendor who received the money.

The database would be searchable, so visitors to the site would be able to sort the information to find out, for example, on what items the state spends the most money and which vendors doing business with Ohio government receive the most pay.

The idea has wide-ranging support.

Dovilla's legislation, which got its initial hearing before a House committee Tuesday, has bipartisan sponsorship. He hopes the bill could at least clear the Ohio House before summer recess.

The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a conservative think tank in Columbus, which also posts online databases with salary information, backs the idea.



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It also has support from the more liberal Ohio Public Interest Research Group.

Tabitha Woodruff, a public interest advocate for OPIRG, described the effort as a good move toward making government more transparent to the public. She noted her organization recently gave Ohio low marks compared to other states on spending transparency.

The plan "takes Ohio in the right direction by opening up the state's checkbook to the public in a simple, user-friendly format," she said. "While this legislation directly addresses some of the concerns ... Ohio still has a long way to go to become truly accountable to the taxpayers for how state dollars are spent."

Mandel said he thinks it could be done with existing staff and within his budget, but he also recognizes it will be a monumental task to set up.

"The intricacies of taking this many expenditures and compiling them and sorting them is a complicated process," he said -- one which will involve working with staffs of nearly every agency in state government to learn more about the specifics of how they make an expenditure.

"Different agencies handle spending in different ways," Mandel said.

That is a lesson learned from setting up the database for public worker pay, where differences in how teachers were paid from how state workers were paid had to be ironed out.

"It's going to take a long while to get this done," Mandel said. "Our hope would be to have the legislation passed and the online checkbook up and running by a year from now."

The administration has not taken a position on the idea or the legislation, but Dovilla, a Republican from Berea, said much of the information already is material the state tracks through its Office of Budget and Management.

"Of course now you can use public records requests to get whatever information you like out of government," he said. "This will make it readily accessible for folks on the Internet."



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The scope of that effort is a reason to enact the program through legislation, Dovilla said. It establishes the effort as a part of Ohio law that must be kept up by the state treasurer's office.

The treasurer's staff probably could take on the database as a project without legislation, Mandel said. "It's the legislative action that ensures that this level of transparency continues beyond my administration."

Mandel envisions it as a tool with many uses, whether it be students looking at spending trends as they learn how government operates, or journalists doing investigative research or taxpayers watchdogging their public officials.

It might also prompt those public officials to use it to elevate their own job performance, Mandel said.

"I think when we hold public officials accountable for their spending decisions, it will make government more efficient."