



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

Stow Sentry

By Jeff Saunders

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Stow -- In rolling out his office's new Ohio Checkbook program, State Treasurer Josh Mandel lauded the city as the first Summit County government entity to come on board.

"There are 3,962 local governments and school districts here in the state of Ohio and the fact that the city of Stow is choosing to be the first one in your county, I think says a lot about the city leaders," said Mandel at Stow City Hall June 15.

Also present standing with Mandel, with about a dozen people in the audience, were Mayor Sara Drew, Finance Director John Baranek, City Council President Matt Riehl, City Council Vice President Mike Rasor, Councilors Bob Adaska and Brian Lowdermilk and State District 27 Sen. Frank LaRose.

City officials say they are finalizing the process, including working with a software company, to prepare the city to join other statewide public entities on the website, which numbered 144 as of June 17. The program encourages transparency in government by allowing it to post expenditures for the public to access with a search engine.

At the City Hall presentation, Mandel said his office launched the program, which took about 18 months to develop, about six months ago. He said the program is a voluntary "partnership."

"No information will be posted without the city signing off on it," he said.

Mandel and LaRose, both Republicans, said that the initiative has received bipartisan support, with Mandel noting that Mayor Drew, who has expressed strong support, is a Democrat. LaRose also compared the program to "cloud sourcing" in the private sector in that by providing the public with greater access to information, it taps the "collective wisdom" of many people to make government better.

"We've got folks unfortunately at the federal level of government who can't agree on what day of the week it is," said LaRose. "But here at the local level where real government is done on a daily basis, where public safety is delivered, where public infrastructure is maintained, parks and recreation, all those important things we rely on every day of our lives, they're more pragmatic than that. They recognize problem solving is not a Republican thing, it's not a Democratic thing, it's something the people do together."

City officials have expressed pretty much universal support for the city taking part. City Council unanimously approved a resolution June 11 "memorializing" or showing Council's official support for participation. Council President Matt Riehl said during the City Hall presentation that he is "proud and honored" that Stow is "taking the lead and charge for transparency's sake" in the county.

"Our 34,768 bosses here in Stow expect and deserve government that is transparent and honest," he said, adding that Ohio Checkbook will also make it easier for city officials to find out if companies are offering neighboring communities better deals on such expenditures as asphalt for roads than they are giving Stow.

"We're going to know about it and they're going to have to answer some questions," he said.

Drew expressed enthusiasm for the city's involvement.

"There are so many good things and positive stories to come out of our community and city government and today is no exception," she said.

Finance Director John Baranek said he believes that providing more information will result in more civic involvement, including more people running for office.



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"I'd like to see people get more involved in the community," he said.

Mandel said the amount of information that can be provided is enormous, from millions of dollars for road materials to what is paid for "pencils in someone's office." One major expenditure that he is encouraging public entities include is personnel, including salaries, something that the treasurer's office has provided on its website at the state level for several years.

"As we move forward to put online all the information from local governments, I would like to have the salary information on there as well because its public record," he said.

Baranek said the city routinely provides salary information when there is a public records request, but needs to make sure that before it provides such information online, it does not include information that is legally considered confidential.

"We'll be looking at all that as we go through," he said.

Gilbert Road resident Paul Zuravel said he likes Ohio Checkbook and particularly believes salary information should be included and noted that personnel expenses are a significant portion of the city's budget.

"I don't see why any city would want to not be transparent," he said.

Baranek said he feels the program will help reduce some of the workload for city staff who process public records requests.

"This actually moves us towards more transparency in our records," he said. "It should cut down on public records requests."

Mandel said it will allow the public to zero in on the specifics of what is being asked for and submit more detailed requests, thereby avoiding a common reason why requests are refused.

"It will make it pretty difficult for the government to say 'Hey, it's an overly broad request,'" he said.

Mandel said that as the number of public entities signing up increases, the number will grow faster and faster due to public demand.

"After awhile, it's going to get uncomfortable for those local governments and school districts that have not signed up," he said.

Mandel said that providing state financial information and then rolling out Ohio Checkbook is part of an ambitious long-term goal. His office is already providing information to a number of other states and he foresees a day when numerous states having such a program could encourage the federal government to consider it.

"My ultimate vision is an army of citizen watchdogs that can hold public officials accountable," said Mandel. "My ultimate, ultimate vision here is once we show leadership in Ohio, once we build up this critical mass of local governments in Ohio that have done the same thing, is to take the show on the road and build up a critical mass of states around the country."

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