



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

By Carl Burnett Jr. | Lancaster Eagle-Gazette

LANCASTER — Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel is traveling across the state urging state senators to vote for legislation that would create a spending database.

"I think people in the state of Ohio have a right to know where tax dollars are being spent," Mandel said Wednesday during a stop at The Eagle-Gazette. "What I would like to see is citizen auditors from all over the state being able to go online and see what their elected officials are spending their taxpayer money on."

Mandel said he had been working on the proposal for months. In May, House Bill 175 was introduced in the Ohio House to give him authority to create an online database that would show how all the state's money is spent.

"If this is created, people during their lunch hours or after work, reporters around the state and country, all can go online and type in an agency, a company name, a state employee and see what has been paid to them," Mandel said.

The database would let anyone with Internet access to track every cent the state government spends, from travel expenses to office supplies or travel expenses.

It was introduced by Rep. Mike Dovilla, R-Berea, and garnered support from Democrats and Republicans while it made its way through the Ohio House. In June, it was passed in the Ohio House of Representatives by a vote of 86-8, garnering some bipartisan support along the way.

State Rep. Gerald Stebelton, R-Lancaster, voted for the bill.

"The whole idea behind the legislation is transparency," Stebelton said. "The goal is to allow people to have access to this information without having to go through a public record request. It will all be there right online. The intent is a good one. Transparency is always better when it comes to public money and how it is spent, so I supported it."

Groups as diverse as the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, the Ohio Public Interest Research Group and the Ohio Newspaper Association has supported the legislation.

"The bill would make more government information available and easily accessible for the public, so that's a good thing," said Dennis R. Hetzel, executive director of the Ohio Newspaper Association. "I understand there is some disagreement about what state agency or office is the best place to host this. That's really up to the Legislature to work out, and the ONA does not have a position on that."

Mandel said to establish the online database would cost thousands initially, but that his office had the money to pay for the establishment of the database.

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"Then it is just a cost of maintaining it and that the set up, and maintenance should be in the thousands, not the millions. We have had some opposition about the bill with detractors saying that future treasurers would have to maintain the site, but that is why we are asking for it to be authorized through legislation," Mandel said. "I can establish it and would maintain as long as I'm in office, but after we've set it up and established it, I don't want to have some future treasurer kill the site when they are in office."

Mandel said the site would go back to 2008, providing some historical reference point for people looking at the data for evaluation purposes.

While the bill passed the Ohio House, it will need to pass the Ohio Senate during the fall session and get the governor's signature to become law.

Next year, a new General Assembly will be seated and the process for the bill would have to start over again.