



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Denise G. Callahan
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BUTLER COUNTY —

Starting today, Butler County residents will be able to view every check written and expense county government has incurred for the past two years via State Treasurer Josh Mandel's OhioCheckbook web portal.

Butler is the 12th out of 88 counties to sign up for the online checkbook. County Auditor Roger Reynolds said he has already demonstrated a commitment to fiscal transparency, and this is just a bigger and better outlet for the information.

"We're going to post it (the data) monthly," Reynolds said. "The transparency on spending is something I did within the first three months of taking office in 2008, so this is just a continuation. The state treasurer's office is a better tool."

The expenditure reports on Reynolds website are in PDF format and are just for his office, the state checkbook will show every check written by all offices and departments in the county, and the tool allows the viewer to customize the information they are looking for.

Mandel put the state's books online in December 2014 and invited local jurisdictions to join him in April 2015 at no cost. There are 3,962 local governments and school districts in the state and so far 70 cities and villages, 47 townships, 53 school districts and five special districts have opened their books to the public, and there have been more than 444,000 searches on the site. The Republican treasurer also has commitments from 480 other jurisdictions — including West Chester and Madison townships — to join the checkbook.

"My goal with OhioCheckbook.com is to create an army of citizen watchdogs who have the power to hold politicians accountable," Mandel told the Journal-News. "My mission here is to empower taxpayers to hold politicians' feet to the fire."

Hamilton was one of the first communities in the county to partner with Mandel and Finance Director Tom Vanderhorst said in the past 90 days — that is as far back as the tool will go to search for visits at the local level — 619 people have clicked on the tool, about half of them found it via the city's online budget portal. Hamilton's page has more than just the check register, there is a wealth of financial information that illustrates the city's financial picture. Vanderhorst said it is a critical tool.

"Transparency promotes credibility," he said. "The more that we can share with folks our financial information I think the more they understand the hard choices we're having to make."

Mandel said it cost almost \$814,000 to build the tool, and he credited Sen. Bill Coley, R-Liberty Twp., for pushing through the appropriation. There is no cost for the local jurisdictions to use the tool, but the state paid a one-time \$975,000 licensing fee for

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the system and pays an annual maintenance fee of \$400,000 to \$975,000, depending on the number of jurisdictions that participate. Reynolds said it will only take his employees about 15 minutes once a month to upload the data to the state, so there is virtually no fiscal impact on his office.

In Butler County, Liberty and Oxford townships and the Talawanda schools are on the checkbook so far. Liberty Twp. Spokeswoman Caroline McKinney said they have had 51 visits with an average time on the site of four minutes 47 seconds over the past 90 days.

"For those of us working in local government, I like the accountability the online checkbook places on communities," Liberty Twp. Trustee Thomas Farrell said when they announced their partnership with the treasurer in July. "And the level of detail available is great, it's a very user-friendly and informative tool. I commend the Treasurer's Office for being one of the first in the country to offer something like this to Ohio taxpayers."

The state's spending transparency rating by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group shot up from 46 to number one in March because of the tool.

Warren County was one of the first counties to sign up and Auditor Matt Nolan said they have had 319 county residents visit the checkbook in the past 90 days, 169 in the past month, 42 clicks in the last week and more than half of the site visitors hail from Mason.

He said he hasn't had any people call him to criticize any expenditures yet. The lowest check amount written by the county was for one cent to Solutions Community Counseling and the biggest one was for \$8.3 million to Motorola in 2013 for the radio upgrades.

The Warren County checkbook dates back to 2010, but since Butler County switched its accounting software, there will only be data from 2014 and 2015 and checks written going forward.

Nolan said the only possible downside of the checkbook is if Mandel ever leaves office and his replacement either does away with the tool or starts charging.

"When Treasurer Mandel is gone and the next treasurer wants to use that money for something else, the state never continues to pay for things the way they do at the start," Nolan said. "That's something we've talked about in our office is are we going to keep doing it when there is a cost to us. That's something we'll have to consider, but right now when there is no cost to you, I don't see the reluctance, to be honest."

Mandel said he is not unhappy with the participation levels but obviously wants more jurisdictions to buy in.

"I'm pleased with the rate at which the local governments and school districts have been signing up to put their finances on OhioCheckbook.com," he said. "In Ohio there's roughly 4,000 local governments and school districts. So in the process of putting



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their finances online there's going to be leaders and there's going to be followers. I'm proud to recognize Butler County as a leader in transparency."

OhioCheckbook.com by the Numbers

Number of jurisdictions on the checkbook now: 175

Number of local governments and school districts committed: 480

Number of searches statewide: 444,000

Cost to build: \$813,979

Cost to license: \$975,000

Cost to maintain: \$400,00 to \$975,000 depending on the number of jurisdictions

Cost to Butler County: 0

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