



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

Napoleon Northwest Signal
By Jen Lazenby
June 16, 2016

HOLGATE — Additional financial transparency is the goal of four entities in Henry County who kicked off their Ohio Checkbook websites Wednesday morning.

The website OhioCheckbook.com, run by the State Treasurer's Office, offers a platform for local entities in the state to display how their funds are being spent.

"We want to applaud every single one of you here because this is a voluntary program, and you have now opened up your checkbooks to your constituents to see how their hard-earned taxpayer dollars are being spent," said Andrew Coutts, public affairs officer for the state treasurer's office, during the kickoff at Holgate Local Schools.

Henry County, Holgate Local Schools and the villages of Liberty Center and Malinta are the first four entities in Henry County which have opted to utilize the voluntary program and now have their information online. Henry County is the 19th county to participate in the state.

A short demonstration on the function of the sites was included in the kickoff, including a "Google-style" contextual search which allows sorting by keyword, department, category and vendor; interactive charts which can be either bar graphs, pie charts, tree maps and horizontal stack charts; and the capability to export data. The website can also be useful for internal purposes within the entities, especially for trend analyses.

"If you choose one of the transactions and click on them, you get a representation of the check with 35 pieces of information," Coutts said, but noted there is not any confidential information such as account or routing numbers included in the representation. "You'll see payee, amount, date, check number.

"You can even see 'where's the money coming from,' that allows constituents to see the appropriation line items that this money is coming from," Coutts continued.

He also noted each entry includes an e-mail link to send questions, and those are directed to the entity's point of contact, typically a treasurer, auditor or fiscal officer. In addition, there's the option to share charts or checks with social media networks.

"This is an ever-evolving tool," Coutts said. "We are ever evolving and taking suggestions to try to improve these sites."

State Rep. Rob McColley, R-Napoleon, said the legislature has codified the checkbook website and it will continue to be supported into the future.



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

"Even though it's the government entities that are spending this money, we all understand where this money came from, those are taxpayer dollars," he said, thanking the state and local entities for participating. "I think this underscores the importance of transparency and ... the use of technology to improve government for its citizens."

Jerry Endicott, a member of Liberty Center Village Council, said he was especially interested in the checkbook for its help in the budgeting process.

"I liked it right away because of the ability to go back and look at your spending history, which helps us build the budget for the next year so much easier," he said.

Holgate Local Schools Treasurer Lisa Shanks said she feels transparency is important and the online checkbook provides that transparency in a method which most people are accustomed to — online.

"I think this website offers a unique resource to our taxpayers that's user-friendly," Shanks said.

Henry County Auditor Kevin Garringer echoed the idea of the transparency.

"It just shows that we have nothing to hide," he said. "It's their money, the public has a right to know how we spend taxpayer dollars and this is one way to reach out to everyone in Henry County."

The representatives of those participating also noted individuals from the treasurer's office were very helpful and it was not a difficult set-up process.

Liberty Center Finance Director Sally McEwen asked whether the revenue side would also be added for viewing. Coutts said the company providing the website does offer that capability, but the focus right now is on the expenditure side.

State Treasurer Josh Mandel launched the program for spending at the state level in December 2014 and it's now open to individual entities to also provide their information. With the four new sites added Wednesday, there are now 354 live sites and 720 committed entities.

"At the time (December 2014), Ohio had a transparency rating of 46th in the nation," said Coutts. "Today, we were just ranked, for the second year in a row, number one."

"We believe a big part of being ranked number one is working with local entities across the state to open up their checkbooks for their constituents," he added.

####