



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Ron Osburn
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Holgate Mayor Wally Snyder admits he was skeptical at first when he was approached about the possibility of his village participating in a new financial transparency website from the Ohio Treasurer's Office.

After all, he said, he's conservative, from conservative northwest Ohio, and he was concerned about resistance from his village council.

"I was reluctant at first. But I think it has great potential," Snyder said Wednesday after attending a 30-minute interactive demonstration of the website by treasurer's office staff at the Northwest Ohio Educational Service Center in Archbold.

The website, OhioCheckbook.com, is a first-of-its-kind website that, for the first time in Ohio history, gives state and local jurisdictions, agencies and school districts the ability to put all of their financial information into an easily accessible form on the internet.

OhioCheckbook.com sets a new national standard for government transparency, said Andrew Coutts of the Ohio Treasurer's Office, who led the presentation which was directed at public officials from northwest Ohio local governments and school districts in Williams, Defiance, Fulton and Henry counties.

It has taken Ohio from No. 46 in the nation in state financial transparency to No. 1 in the past two years, according to the Public Interest Research Group.

"This makes it easy for citizens of the state of Ohio to look up information on how their tax money is being spent," said Coutts, who was joined Wednesday by fellow treasurer's office staffer Kelly Anne Ilagan.

The website was launched in September 2015 with 111 state entities & school districts, townships, etc. & participating. Coutts said that number is up to 402 entities with another 776 in the process of setting up their sites.

NOW IN NEY

The nearby village of Ney is one of the 402 currently participating, having logged on earlier this year, said village clerk-treasurer Jerry Bergman. He said he found the process "very easy."

"I think it's a good thing. I see a lot of advantages. You get to see where your money is going and how it's being spent," said Bergman, who has been in his position for 20 years.

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"It's public records anyway, so why don't we just put it out there," he added.

Coutts said for most entities, it just takes a few days to complete the four-step process, and currently includes data from entities as large as Columbus City Schools and Cuyahoga County to those as small as Ney.

OhioCheckbook.com also includes data from a variety of entities, including everything from city governments to libraries and soil and water districts. It can also be used as a platform for posting meeting minutes, Coutts said, and includes an analytics feature to capture and track a variety of data, such as who is using the site, what information they are accessing and where they live.

And, OhioCheckbook.com is completely voluntary and free. It's also continually evolving, so suggestions and feedback to make the site better are always welcome, Coutts said.

Coutts and Ilagan acknowledged there has been some resistance to the website. But they emphasized that the information is publicly available under Ohio's public records law, so having it easily accessible to both citizens and officials can cut down the time and expense it takes to retrieve the information.

Snyder said he's sold.

"I intend to take the information back and speak positively about it to council," he said.

For more information about OhioCheckbook.com, contact Ilagan at 614-705-1035.

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