

## Open Government is Better Government

One of the fundamental tenets of democracy is that citizens should have visibility into the actions and decisions of their elected representatives. In particular, enabling citizens to see how their taxpayer dollars are spent bolsters public confidence in government, promotes fiscal accountability, and acts as a check on corruption.

As Thomas Jefferson noted in 1802, "We might hope to see the finances of the Union as clear and intelligible as a merchant's books, so that every member of Congress and every man of any mind in the Union should be able to comprehend them, to investigate abuses, and consequently control them."

Unfortunately, Massachusetts has lagged behind many other states in providing budget transparency with comprehensive online access to government expenditures. Leading states like Kentucky and Ohio provide online databases of all government spending with "checkbook-level" detail. These websites are easily searchable and include detailed information about government contracts, tax subsidies and credits, and special grants to businesses.

This level of budget and spending transparency yields a number of significant benefits:

- *Cost savings.* Greater transparency helps save taxpayer dollars through more efficient government administration, increased competition for government contracts, and reduced information requests.
- *Better-targeted expenditures.* Greater transparency makes it easier to track how well subsidies and tax incentives are delivering results. Money recaptured from projects that fail to deliver promised results can be reinvested in more successful programs.
- *Increased civic engagement.* People are used to being able to search online and instantly access information on virtually any topic. They expect to be able to easily find and review information on their government's finances.

To bring a greater level of budget and spending transparency to Massachusetts, I'm a co-sponsor of *An Act Relative to Transparency in State Revenues and Expenditures*. This bill would create a searchable online database describing the costs, recipients, and purposes for all appropriations, including contracts, grants, subcontracts, tax expenditures, and other subsidies funded by our state government. The database would include all state revenue sources and expenses, including the "quasi-government" agencies. The website would be accessible to the public and updated on a regular basis. I testified in support of this bill at a Public Hearing held by the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight in June, 2009.

Since this bill has to compete with thousands of other bills to reach the floor of the House and Senate before the end of the current legislative session, I joined a number of my colleagues in pushing for budget transparency to be taken up during the FY11 budget debate in the House in late April. I'm pleased that our efforts were successful.

The budget passed by the House calls for the creation of a searchable website to increase visibility into how the state spends tax revenues. The database will serve as a one-stop portal to track all areas of state spending, including tax credit programs. Starting in 2011, the identity of recipients of these credits as well as the amount of the credits will be made publicly available on the new website.

I'm hopeful that the Senate will also make budget transparency a priority when they debate the FY11 budget later this month, and that Massachusetts will soon become a leader in providing its citizens with full and open access to budget and spending information.

I welcome your feedback on government transparency or any other issues. Please visit our website at [www.RepJasonLewis.com](http://www.RepJasonLewis.com). You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at [Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us](mailto:Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us).

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