

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



Iowa Transparency: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

by Ellen Racheter

“A popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce, or a tragedy, or perhaps both.”¹

- James Madison

Iowa is one of the more desirable states in which to live and rear a family, according to the “2008 Most Livable State” rankings. Rankings are based on 44 factors ranging from median household income to crime rate, from sunny days to infant mortality rate. We are ranked fifth, up one place from 2007, and are comfortably sandwiched between Minnesota (4) and Nebraska (6). We compare favorably to North Dakota (10), South Dakota (9), Wisconsin (23), Illinois (26), and Missouri (34).²

On the whole, we are also a relatively healthy bunch. Iowa is ranked 14th in *America’s Health Rankings – 2007 Edition*, below Minnesota (2), Nebraska (10), and Wisconsin (12), and above South Dakota (16), Illinois (27), and Missouri (35).³ We are ranked the fourth healthiest state with respect to depression status as well.⁴ All of this speaks well to the quality

of life enjoyed in Iowa in the early 21st century.

We could stand to improve in some other areas, however. We have the highest corporate tax rate among the 50 states, creating a less than ideal climate to attract new business.⁵ In July of 2007, *Forbes* gave Iowa an overall rank of 24th, up one place from the 2006 ranking, in its table of the best states for business, taking into account such factors as business costs, labor, regulatory environment, and economic climate.⁶

Iowa could also improve its standing among the states in the timely and urgent movement toward transparency in state and local government spending.

In 2006, the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act was enacted by Congress and signed by the President, creating a free, publicly searchable website for all federal contracts and grants of amounts over \$25,000 with some exclusions for classified information, federal assistance payments, and payments to

federal employees.⁷ Information may be accessed online at www.usaspending.gov and www.federalspending.gov.

Following the example set by the federal government, the state legislatures of Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Hawaii enacted transparency legislation in 2007. These states were joined in 2008 by Washington, Utah, Mississippi, and Louisiana.⁸ In addition, at least 17 other states have spending transparency legislation pending, according to Sandra Fabry of Americans for Tax Reform.⁹

By gubernatorial action or executive orders, the states of Missouri, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alaska, and Nevada have also moved in the direction of making online spending data available to the public.¹⁰

Where is Iowa in these efforts?

The Des Moines Register published an excellent series of articles on “Sunshine” issues during “Sunshine Week” earlier this year: “Study gives Iowa, 37

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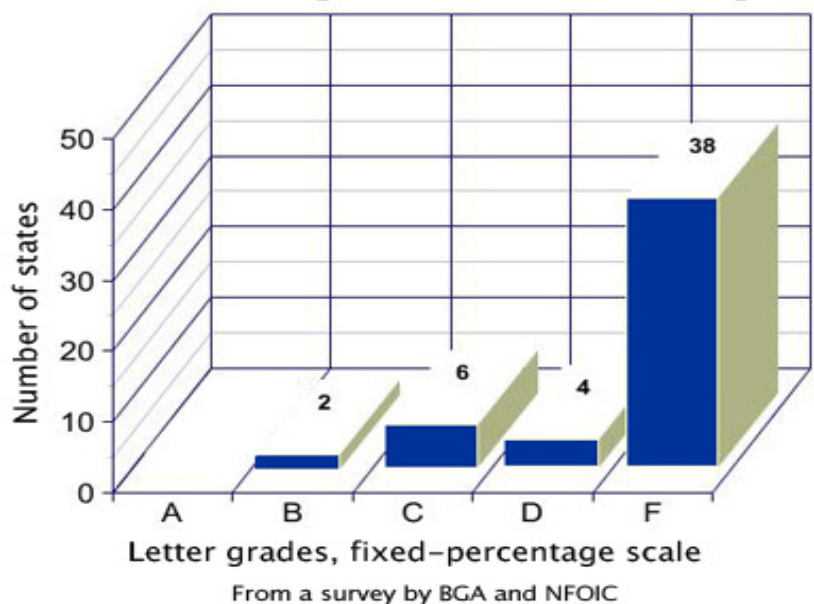
other states 'F' on open records."¹¹ In this article, Lee Rood was referring to a study by the Better Government Association and the National Freedom of Information Coalition at the University of Missouri School of Journalism that assessed the ease with which citizens could obtain access to records.¹² Iowa is among 38 states with a grade of "F."

Another headline from *The Register* read: "'Sunshine bill' failed to rise." "A bill that legislative leaders called a top priority early this year became the last one to die as the 2008 session ended last month,"¹³ wrote Rood, referring to SF 2411, the open records and public meetings bill. It generated much heated discussion and would have put teeth into Iowa's Open Records and Meetings statutes. It would have given recourse to citizens whose requests for information have been stymied by the hemming and hawing of officials who do not want the public to have access to information they have a right to know.

Out of 445 complaints filed with the State Ombudsman's office about alleged violations of the open meetings and open records laws from 2004 to 2006, at least 63 violations were substantiated from those reports, but almost none resulted in formal action.¹⁴ The Ombudsman, William Angrick, is still urging Legislators to keep in mind the need for reform of the open records and meetings laws for the State of Iowa."¹⁵ "I know that Iowa Legislators are much more knowledgeable and sensitive today about these issues and their complexities than they were a year or two ago," said Angrick. "I really urge you to continue that consideration."¹⁶

From other quarters, Iowa looks good. The Pew Center on the States has published a report, "Grading the States 2008," comparing the 50 states with regard to the level of state government management. Iowa received an overall grade of "B," along with Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, and Nebraska, and a "B+" in the "Information" category

Graded state responsiveness to FOI requests



which includes “Online Services and Information.”¹⁷ “Iowa’s Web site provides a wealth of data on almost every aspect of state government.”¹⁸

However, there is always room for improvement, and Rep. Jamie Van Fossen (R), House District 81, made an attempt in the 2008 Legislative session to move in that direction with the introduction of HF 2439, a bill that would require the establishment of a searchable database website by January 1, 2010. Iowa’s citizens would then be able to track the use of their tax dollars with searchable data revealing where the money goes! Searchable data would include contracts, grants, and appropriations.¹⁹

This proposed piece of legislation for the benefit of Iowans died in the House State Government Committee,²⁰ thus becoming a missed opportunity for the State of Iowa to continue its forward movement toward accountability and transparency in state government. What a disappointment for Iowa taxpayers!

Nationwide, state-based free-market think tanks are joining the movement to push for reform in the transparency movement to bring accountability to government processes, not only at the state level but also at the local level. Some state think tanks have created searchable databases of financial transactions of school districts statewide.

The Michigan Transparency Website created by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy is an

excellent example. This website includes links for “Michigan Votes,” “Show Michigan the Money,” and Michigan School District Categorical Grants, Revenue and Expenditures Reports. It also includes check book registers for St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency and Montrose Community Schools, the two school districts that have opened their checkbooks to public scrutiny.²¹

Transparency in school district transactions is an idea whose time has come. Around the nation, pressure upon school districts to open their checkbooks and their contracts is coming from taxpayers. Currently 58 Texas school districts are posting their check registers online, with more districts expected to follow.²² The movement toward accountability and full disclosure will not be stopped.

Public Interest Institute has been studying Iowa government transparency for some time now. Analysts Deborah Thornton and John Hendrickson have contributed to the discussion about state government transparency in the IOWA ECONOMIC SCORECARD, “Transparency in State spending Encourages Limited Government,” July 2007²³ and the INSTITUTE BRIEF, “Working to Increase Government Transparency,” April 2008.²⁴

Public Interest Institute is furthering the cause of transparency and accountability in Iowa state government with the creation of a transparency website, www.iowatransparency.org. In the coming weeks, information on

the Iowa legislative process will be available to “Joe Taxpayer” to see how the dollars total up in the spending column for each Legislator. “Vote Tally” and “Bill Tally,” adapted from the National Taxpayers Union Foundation (NTUF)²⁵ for the 2008 session of the Iowa General Assembly, will make information on appropriations votes immediately accessible to you, the taxpayers of Iowa.

“Vote Tally” analyzes floor votes on appropriations bills and gives reports on spending patterns of Iowa Legislators. “Bill Tally” gives spending data for sponsored legislation introduced in chamber.

What NTUF does with voting records and sponsored spending bills of the United States Congressmen, we at PII will do with the voting records and sponsored spending bills of the Iowa Legislators so that Iowa’s “Joe Taxpayers” will have the knowledge and information to make informed choices the next time we go to the polls. It’s one small step in the right direction!

Endnotes:

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⁶“Table: The Best States For Business – Forbes.com,” <http://www.forbes.com/2007/07/20/washington-virginia-utah-biz-cz_kb_0711bizstates-table_print.html> (May 20, 2008).

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¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Glover, Mike. The Associated Press. “Ombudsman urges lawmakers to update open records laws,” Mount Pleasant News, Wednesday, June 11, 2008, page 3.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Government Performance Project: Grading the States 2008, The Pew Center on the States <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/states_card.aspx?abbr=IA> (July 8, 2008).

¹⁸Ibid.

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Legislation/82ndGA//Bills/HouseFiles/Introduced/HF2439.html

²⁰House Journal, Tuesday, March 4, 2008, Page 491.

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