

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



What is the Iowa Transparency Project?

by Jennifer L. Crull

“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 to control them.” — Thomas Jefferson¹

The March newsletter spoke of the change in writers for the *Iowa Transparency Newsletter*. I thought that I would explain a little bit about my perspective on the initiative that Public Interest Institute (PII) has undertaken on transparency in the state of Iowa over the past couple of years. As with all initiatives that Public Interest Institute oversees, this can only continue to happen with the support of our donors. I hope that this issue of *Iowa Transparency Newsletter* will help clarify what PII is trying to accomplish, and will motivate you to want to donate to the cause.

One of the definitions of “transparent” in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary is “to be easily detected.”² This is NOT what the Iowa Legislators had in mind when they

were passing bills this session. When it was all said and done, the Iowa Legislature passed just 11 appropriation bills, but these bills account for \$5.3 billion in spending for the coming fiscal year.³ As a taxpayer it is your right to understand how your tax dollars are being spent.

Governor Culver has touted himself as being a big supporter of more transparency in government spending. In an interview in January of 2010 on *Iowa Press*, Governor Culver stated that “The bottom line is we need more transparency, more accountability, and taxpayers deserve it.”⁴ Yet, as taxpayers, we are still in the dark about how our tax dollars are being spent, and the Governor has not sent any legislation to the General Assembly to help open up government. What does this say about our Governor’s support of transparency in government?

You would think on the heels of the scandal by the Iowa Film Office and now the investigation of the Iowa Association of School Boards, both the Governor and the Legislature would want to work together and open up the spending

information for our state, county, and local governments. PII’s goal is to help push the government to open up the spending information, but until that happens, we will help Iowans to see what the government is using your money for.

The Iowa Transparency Project advocates city, county, and state government agencies to make their expenditures more open and accessible to the people of Iowa. One of our initiatives to open up information about what the Legislature is up to is www.IowaVotes.org. This website allows you to see all the detail about every bill and amendment that is proposed in the Iowa House and Senate. This website also provides for the discussion of ideas and issues that are facing our state. This easy-to-use website is more user friendly than the Iowa Legislative website. You can easily see how your Representative or Senator is voting on the bills and amendments as they pass through the respective chambers. This website is updated daily while the Legislature is in session.

Now that the session has come to a close the next initiative that is important to all taxpayers in

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Table 1: Description of the Point Allocation for the Scorecard

Variable	Description	Maximum Number of Points
Checkbook-Level Website	Detailed expenditure information that allows one to view individual payments made to vendors.	40
Search by Contractor	Ability to search expenditures by contractor or vendor name.	10
Search by Activity	Ability to search expenditures by type of service or item purchased (either the website allows a keyword search, or provides a list of categories).	10
Contract or Summary Information	A copy of the contract is included with the expenditure entry, or detailed summary information is provided.	10
Past Contracts	Contracts and expenditures from previous fiscal years are included on the website.	5
Tax Subsidy Information Included in the Database or is Linked	The transparency website includes information on tax credits, or it provides a link to a different website with tax expenditure information.	10
Economic Development Incentives Information	Expenditures such as grants or subsidies are included on the website.	10
Quasi-Public Agencies	Expenditures from quasi-public agencies, such as transit authorities, are included in the website.	2
American Reinvestment and Recovery Act Funding Linked	A link is provided to the state's website that tracks funding related to the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.	2
Local/County Budgets	Financial information for local governments is included on the website.	1
Total		100

Source: "Following the Money: How the 50 States Rank in Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data"

Iowa is the IowaTransparency.org website. This website is a clearinghouse for all issues relating to transparency in Iowa governments. This website will be updated in the month of April with information about how much your Legislature voted to spend for the new fiscal year and how much of your tax dollars it would have liked to have spent. As we are heading into the campaign season for our Representatives and half of our Senators, it is your opportunity to take a look at what they voted for or sponsored with regards to the spending of your tax dollars. Next month's newsletter will spotlight the big spenders for both chambers and discuss what they are spending and wanting to spend your money on. Since we have heard nonstop for the last year and half about the budget shortfalls for the state of Iowa, it will surprise you how many of our Legislators don't seem to care that they are voting to spend more money than the state has.

To underline the need for the Iowa Transparency Project, let me share a report from U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund on "Following the Money: How the 50 States Rank in Pro-

viding Online Access to Government Spending Data." This report ranks all 50 states on how well they have moved towards Transparency 2.0, which means that the website is a user-friendly format, allowing the user to search for detailed information about government contracts, spending, subsidies, and grants for all governmental entities.⁵ This report had ten different criteria that they used to rank the 50 states. Those ten criteria are listed in Table 1. The most points were given for being able to have checkbook-level details on the website. The other areas included being able to search by contractor, search by activity, and being able to see the contract. Emphasis was also placed on being able to access tax subsidy information and information concerning economic development incentives.⁶ These are all areas where government needs to work to make the information more user-friendly.

As you review Table 1, think how nice it would be to be able to search for this type of information for our state. As a taxpayer you would have a better idea of what your government is up to and how it is using your tax dollars. The

best website to check out is Kentucky at <http://opendoor.ky.gov>.⁷ It shows you important areas that we need to have more information about here in Iowa.

This report scores seven states as "Leading States" in the area of Transparency 2.0: Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Texas, Missouri, and Pennsylvania. All of these states received a grade of B, except Kentucky which received an A.⁸ Iowa, on the other hand, is listed in the bottom part of the table under "Lagging States." Iowa receives a grade of F, for our government has no transparency website.⁹ This is a shame given the performance of the other states in our area. Table 2 shows how Iowa compares to other states in the Midwest region. As you can see, two other states in our region also receive an F, South Dakota and Wisconsin, while Illinois, Minnesota, and Missouri are listed as being "Leading States."

This report speaks to the advantages of using technology to improve public confidence and promote fiscal responsibility. The report states that having a transparency website increased civic engagement, that transparency websites are low cost to create and maintain, and that there is an overall savings due to the reduction in manual requests that the government gets by making all the information easily available. "Minnesota and Illinois have both been able to recapture money from numerous projects that failed to deliver promised results."¹⁰ As difficult as it is to balance our state budget, you would think that our Governor and State Legislature would be pushing for

Table 2: Grade and Score on Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data

State	Grade	Score
Illinois	B	82
Iowa	F	No Transparency website
Minnesota	B	82
Missouri	B	81
Nebraska	D	56
South Dakota	F	25
Wisconsin	F	No Transparency website

Source: "Following the Money: How the 50 States Rank in Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data"

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this type of initiative that would increase trust in our state government.

I hope that you see the importance of this project and will help to support this endeavor. I would ask if you know of school districts, cities, or county government agencies that post their expenditures online, please let us know at our email listed elsewhere in this newsletter. This issue is a bipartisan issue that all Iowans should rally behind. The only way government will become more open is if the voters push this issue. As we are heading into the election cycle this fall remember to ask all candidates about transparency in government spending. Whether or not we trust government at the local, county, state, or federal level, it is our responsibility to question our candidates about their posi-

tions on topics we are concerned about and hold them to the promises that they make. Remember to ask yourself how well are your elected officials working for you, the taxpayer? For all elected officials do work for you, and only you can give them a “pink slip” if they need it.

Endnotes:

¹Adrienne Kock and William Peden, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Random House, New York, New York, 1993, p. 518.

²Definition of “transparent,” *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transparent>>.

³Legislative Fiscal Division, “Estimated Condition of the General Fund,” p. 1, <<http://staffweb.legis.state.ia.us/lfb/Docs/end-of-session/2010/Final%20General%20Fund%20Balance%20Sheet.pdf>> (April 12, 2010).

⁴IPTV, *Iowa Press*, January 15, 2010,

<http://www.iptv.org/iowapress/episode.cfm/3719/video/ip_20100115_3719> (April 19, 2010).

⁵Phineas Baxandall and Kari Wohlschlegel, “Following the Money: How the 50 States Rank in Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data,” *U.S. PIRG Education Fund*, April 2010, p. 8, <<http://cdn.publicinterestnetwork.org/assets/b3ba157e28d82952ee5b7a3f84e88499/Following-the-Money-USPIRG.pdf>> (April 13, 2010).

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

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