

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



Iowans Hope for Some Sunshine in January

by Jennifer L. Crull

This month Iowans decided they wanted and needed a change in leadership in Iowa. That change will come in the Governor's office and in the House of the Iowa General Assembly. This new administration brings the hope that a more transparent government will develop before our eyes, one that allows our state, county, and local governments to move forward with the transparency issue.

When Governor-Elect Terry Branstad addressed the attendees of the 2010 Iowa Taxpayers' Day hosted by Iowans for Tax Relief, the first thing he stated was that Iowa needs a government that has "openness and transparency."¹ Branstad went on to say that "One of my first actions will be to establish a Website to track state spending and make Iowa government more transparent like they have done in 30 other states."² This support is important as he takes office in January. While it is great that our Governor-Elect has that support for the issue of transparency, it is important for us to remember that he needs the support of our State Senators and State Representatives. So, stay tuned, for you will hear more about this as the legislative session gets started and what we

have to do as taxpayers to get this accomplished.

But in the mean time I would like to share a Website that is dedicated to creating more transparency at all levels of government. This Website is SunshineReview.org. The Sunshine Review "is a non-profit organization dedicated to state and local government transparency."³ Sunshine Review uses a "10-point Transparency Checklist" to evaluate state and local government Websites on their content.⁴ This "10-point Transparency Checklist" is in Table One. As you can see, it is an extensive list of items to evaluate a Website. The Sunshine Review Website states that this list is changing as the needs of the people change.⁵

How does the state of Iowa rate, as well as the county and local governments, and the school districts in our state? On the main page of the Sunshine Review you just have to click on **Find Your State**. You will then see a map, which will allow you to click on Iowa. Then you will see a page with "Iowa on Sunshine Review" as its title.⁶ The first item you see is about Iowa News. Next to that is the Transparency Report Card for Iowa. It lists the state as a C-, counties as a D, cities as

incomplete, and the school districts are also incomplete as they are still working on evaluating them.⁷

As you look at the evaluation of the state Website, you will notice the following as the good and bad aspects of the Website:

Good:

- Audit reports are available.
- Information on state ethics commission available.
- State tax information is provided.
- Elected and administrative officials are listed with contact information under respective departments.
- Provides list of Executive branch lobbyists.

Bad:

- Site has a search function, but is somewhat difficult to navigate.
- Budget recommendation and process information posted, but the full budget is not posted on the Website. The budget for FY 2010 can, however, be found at this link (<http://staffweb.legis.state.ia.us/lfb/docs/BudgAnalysis/FY2010/PreliminaryGovSum.pdf>).
- State contracts are not available.

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Table One: 10-Point Transparency Checklist

Areas	Rational for Rating
Budget	The website should include the current budget. Bonus points if the website shows the budgets for previous years, and a graph showing increases or decreases over time to help citizens evaluate and understand trends in local government spending. The checkbook register and credit card receipts should also be posted.
Open Meeting Laws	The website should include notices about public meetings of its governing board, and minutes of past meetings. Also check for meeting agendas for future and/or past meetings.
Elected Officials	The website should include names of elected officials, and their contact information, including e-mail addresses. Also we should be able to see an elected official's voting record.
Administrative Officials	The website should be listed on government websites. The website should include the names of key administrators, and their contact information, including e-mail addresses.
Building Permits and Zoning	At the very least, applications should be available to be downloaded online. In addition, constituents should be able to submit applications and track the process online.
Audits	The website should include regular audit information including: report results, audit schedules, and performance audits for government programs.
Contracts	The website should include rules governing contracts posted online; including bids and contracts for purchases over \$10,000 and the vendor's campaign contributions posted with contract.
Lobbying	If the unit of government belongs to any taxpayer-funded lobbying associations that it helps to fund by paying association or membership dues, that information should be disclosed on the government unit's website.
Public records	The website should include the name of the person who is in charge of fulfilling open records requests, along with contact information for that person.
Local Taxes	The website should include a central location for all tax information, including state "fees" such as drivers' licenses; tax documents for all elected officials and each agency's sources of revenue.

Source: Sunshine Review Website, www.sunshinereview.org

- Does not provide information on state-paid lobbying and agency lobbying contracts.
- Attorney General has information on Iowa Open

Records Law, but no forms/contact information to make record requests available.⁸

This gives us a clear idea of where the state needs to head. If

Table Two: Iowa Counties Ranking of Website

County	Rating	County	Rating
Adair	F*	Jefferson	D
Adams	F	Johnson	C
Allamakee	F	Jones	C-
Appanoose	F	Keokuk	F
Audubon	C-	Kossuth	D
Benton	D	Lee	D
Black Hawk	C-	Linn	B-
Boone	F	Louisa	D
Bremer	C-	Lucas	F*
Buchanan	F*	Lyon	C-
Buena Vista	C-	Madison	D-
Butler	D	Mahaska	F
Calhoun	F	Marion	C-
Carroll	D	Marshall	D-
Cass	F*	Mills	F
Cedar	D-	Mitchell	D-
Cerro Gordo	D	Monona	F*
Cherokee	F	Monroe	F*
Chickasaw	F	Montgomery	F
Clarke	D-	Muscatine	C-
Clay	B-	O'Brien	F*
Clayton	D-	Osceola	F*
Clinton	C-	Page	F*
Crawford	F	Palo Alto	F*
Dallas	C-	Plymouth	D
Davis	D-	Pocahontas	F*
Decatur	F*	Polk	B
Delaware	C-	Pottawattamie	C
Des Moines	D	Poweshiek	C-
Dickinson	F	Ringgold	F
Dubuque	F	Sac	D-
Emmet	D-	Scott	B
Fayette	F	Shelby	C-
Floyd	D-	Sioux	F
Franklin	C-	Story	C
Fremont	F	Tama	F
Greene	D-	Taylor	F*
Grundy	C-	Union	F
Guthrie	F	Van Buren	F*
Hamilton	D-	Wapello	F
Hancock	F	Warren	B-
Hardin	C-	Washington	D-
Harrison	F	Wayne	F*
Henry	C-	Webster	D
Howard	F*	Winnebago	F*
Humboldt	D	Winneshiek	F*
Ida	F*	Woodbury	F
Iowa	D	Worth	D-
Jackson	F	Wright	C
Jasper	D		

* - Means that the county doesn't have a Website.

Source: Sunshine Review Website, www.sunshinereview.org

you will remember from the April Newsletter, I shared that the U.S. PIRG rated the Iowa Website an "F", because the state does not provide a separate Website for transparency issues.⁹ We have to hope that Governor-Elect Branstad's administration takes into consider-

ation the points raised by Sunshine Review.

The last part we are going to look at is the counties report card. Sunshine Review has evaluated all 99 counties in Iowa. Table Two includes the evaluation of those 99 counties on transparency. Only

two counties received a rating of B, which is the highest rating for any Iowa county. These two counties are Polk County and Scott County. Yet, on the flip side, we have 19 counties in Iowa that still don't have a Website. One has to wonder how it is possible that in today's age of technology a county would not have a Website available. If you visit the Sunshine Review Website you will see the evaluation of all 99 counties on the ten-point check list that Sunshine Review uses.¹⁰ This allows you to have a detailed understanding of your county Website and the information that is contained on it.

As I stated earlier, the Sunshine Review has not yet evaluated all the city and school district Websites in Iowa. That is a project that it is cur-

Rating of Iowa's Website by Sunshine Review

GRADE: C-

- Budget ✘
- Usability ◐
- Elected Officials ✔
- Administrative Officials ✔
- Ethics ✔
- Audits ✔
- Contracts ✘
- Lobbying ◐
- Public records ◐
- Taxes ✔

✔ PRESENT
✘ MISSING
◐ INCOMPLETE

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rently working on. You can help by reviewing Websites that haven't been added to the project. YES, you can be involved in the process of making people aware of the information that is out there. Check out this link to get started evaluating Websites in your area, http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Sunshine_Review:Evaluating_government_websites.

The only way government is going to open up and share its information with us is if we continue to pressure it. It is our right as taxpayers to know how our tax dollars are being spent at all levels. So, I recommend you start talking to all your elected officials from the local level all the way to the state level and make them aware that you want more transparency in government spending. The more they hear from their constituents about transparency, the more supportive they will

become of it. So, go out and make the sunshine happen!

Endnotes

¹ Iowa Taxpayers Day 2010, April 17, 2010, Iowans For Tax Relief, <<http://iowansfortaxrelief.blip.tv/file/3619391/>> (November 15, 2010).

² Ibid.

³ "About Us," Sunshine Review, <http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Sunshine_Review> (November 16, 2010).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Transparency Checklist," Sunshine Review, <http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Transparency_checklist> (November 22, 2010).

⁶ "Iowa on Sunshine Review," Sunshine Review, <<http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/iowa>> (November 17, 2010).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Evaluation of Iowa state website," Sunshine Review, <http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Evaluation_of_Iowa_state_website>

(November 22, 2010).

⁹ Phineas 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. 30-31, <<http://cdn.publicinterestnetwork.org/assets/b3ba157e28d82952ee5b7a3f84e88499/Following-the-Money-USPIRG.pdf>> (April 13, 2010).

¹⁰ "Evaluation of Iowa county websites," Sunshine Review, <http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Evaluation_of_Iowa_county_websites> (November 15, 2010).

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