

IOWA TRANSPARENCY NEWSLETTER



Sunshine for Iowa Bill Tally

by Jennifer L. Crull

The last issue of the *Iowa Transparency Newsletter* did not have much room for an analysis of Iowa Bill Tally. Since this year's Bill Tally looks much different than the previous years', I thought it would be helpful to have a longer explanation of what this information means to you as a taxpayer and how we gather it. So come along on this journey of state spending and gain a better understanding of how much of your money your elected officials are trying to spend this Legislative Session.

The basis of our development of Iowa Bill Tally comes from the National Taxpayers Union Foundation (NTUF). NTUF introduced Bill Tally in 1991 as a way to look at the cost and savings of bills that Members of Congress sponsored. This allowed NTUF to rank all Members of Congress based on the sum of all bills that they sponsored that had a fiscal amount tied to the bill. This method allowed an unbiased way to compare all Members of Congress.¹ For the Iowa Bill Tally, we took

the same approach that NTUF used on the federal level and applied that to our state level.

This is the fourth year that Public Interest Institute (PII) has reported the Iowa Bill Tally information to our readers. This year we decided that a follow-up piece was warranted due to the vast difference in the results of this year's data compared to the previous three years of data.

In the last few years the Legislature, along with Governor Culver, made use of one-time funding sources and stimulus funding to balance the budget. One of

the big problems with this is that it doesn't allow the taxpayer a clear image of the spending that is going on. A press release from Auditor of State David A. Vaudt noted that "the prior year's budget shifted over \$600 million of General Fund cost [to one-time resources]."² Spending from the General Fund rather than using these one-time resources allows for more sustainability and transparency at the state level. As the state moves forward, and with the financial problems that we know exist at the federal level, our state will be in much better shape relying on our General Fund resources

Bill Tally Methodology

Bill Tally measures the potential fiscal impact of legislation introduced during the 2011 First Session of the 84th Iowa General Assembly, should it have been adopted. Information on sponsored legislation was obtained from the Iowa General Assembly web pages for each individual Legislator. Only legislation with fiscal impact was included. All fiscal amounts were obtained from the Iowa Legislative Services Agency.

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vs. using one-time funding streams that could dry up. So, while it does look like General Fund spending has gone up by quite a bit, it is really just a more accurate picture of the funds that the state has been spending.

The second point that makes this year different than the last three years is the increase in the number of bills with fiscal amounts tied to them. Last year, we had eight bills from the Iowa Senate and nine bills from the Iowa House. This year we had 20 bills proposed from the Iowa Senate and 33 bills proposed from the Iowa House. It is important to note that these bills included bills that increased spending of the General Fund and also decreased spending of the General Fund.

So as we look at the data from Iowa Bill Tally, what does it mean to you, the taxpayer? First you have to understand the meth-

odology that is used for analyzing Iowa Bill Tally. The first process is to review all bills that are introduced and have a fiscal report from the Legislative Services Agency. This information can be found at <http://www3.legis.state.ia.us/fiscalnotes/>.³

From the Fiscal Notes page, we are able to select all the bills that have an impact on the General Fund. We review the sponsorship of each fiscal bill. If the bill had individual sponsorship then that bill is assigned to that respective Legislator. If the bill comes from a Senate Committee, we review the Senate Journal to see which Senators voted for the bill in committee, which ones voted against, and which ones were absent for the votes. If the Senator voted for the committee to sponsor the bill, the bill is assigned to that respective Senator. If the Senator voted against or was absent, then the bill is not assigned to them. For the House we have a different

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process. Since the House members don't vote on legislation when it is assigned to a committee, the bill is assigned to all the committee members. This is the process that is repeated for each fiscal bill. After all the bills are assigned, we add up the total amount of fiscal impact each bill has that was assigned to each Legislator. This is the process to figure the total lists that were included in July's newsletter. We do know that there are House members that may not have agreed with a bill that had it assigned to them due to them being on the committee, but this is the best method we have at this time to evaluate the fiscal impact each member of the House and Senate have on the State of Iowa. If you want a clearer picture, ask your House Member to request the leadership to go back to the old system of individual rather than committee bills.

Iowa Bill Tally is not an exact science, but it is a great starting place for you to question your elected official about the legislation that is being introduced at the state level. Our Website, <http://www.IowaTransparency.org>, allows you to see the total lists that were included in the newsletter and it also allows you to see the specific legislation assigned to each Senator and Representative. On the home page you will see a link for the Iowa Bill Tally on the right side. From there you can select either the House or the Senate. Then you can access the data for the last four years.

When you click on each member that is listed you see each bill that was assigned to them. For each bill you can see the bill number. If you click on that bill number, it will take you to the Iowa Legislative *Bill Book*, which has the entire bill, which you can read in detail.⁴ Then you will see the total cost for the bill — this is the amount that is assigned to the Legislator. There is also a brief description of the bill included, if you don't feel like reading the entire legal description from *Bill Book*. Beneath the description is the list of fiscal costs for up to five years. Some pieces of legislation have multiple-year impacts on the General Fund. We choose to use the method of taking the first year cost and assigning the bill that cost for each piece of legislation. All of this data is included on all pieces of legislation that we include in Iowa Bill Tally.

Since there was a large increase in the number of bills introduced this year with fiscal amounts, you will notice that there is also an increased number of Senators and Representatives listed this year. Last year there were 58 out of the 100 Representatives who had bills assigned to them. This year there are 93 out of 100 Representatives listed. The same holds true for the Senate. We had only 37 out of 50 last year, but this year it was 47 out of 50. So it is important to note that this year's session was busy discussing and proposing legislation that impacts our lives.

Public Interest Institute employees are available for speaking engagements on the topic of transparency in government in Iowa and on a variety of other issues.

As you review the list of Legislators you will note that both parties are listed. Public Interest Institute is a nonpartisan organization that is dedicated to shining more sunlight on government spending. While we know that Iowa Bill Tally is a wish-list of possible spending, it is important for you as a taxpayer to understand what is happening in Des Moines. Iowa Bill Tally allows you the opportunity to have a discussion with your elected officials about where they stand on different issues. If you see that your Senator or Representative sponsored a bill that you have questions about, you need to ask questions now, for it is highly possible that that same piece of legislation will reappear next January when the Legislature reconvenes.

The data included in Iowa Bill Tally is brought to you in an effort to increase the informa-

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and
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tion you have about the Iowa Legislature and for you to be able to question your elected officials. For without an open and honest discussion between our elected officials and the voters, our form of government fails to work. So take the time to visit <http://www.IowaTransparency.org>

Thank you for your continued support of Public Interest Institute.

Your support helps us provide public policy research on the issues facing both Iowa and the nation as well as the importance of free-market and constitutional ideas.

[org](http://www.IowaTransparency.org) and view the new data. The quote that sums up this year’s budget process is from State Auditor David Vaudt’s August 29, 2011, press release: “While there are still concerns to be addressed, this budget makes huge progress in the area of fiscal sustainability. I commend the Governor and Legislators of both parties for moving Iowa closer to a fiscally sustainable path. While the budget process took a significant amount of time, the result is clearly a win for the taxpayers of Iowa.”⁵

Endnotes

¹ “NTU Foundation – About,” National Taxpayers Union Foundation, <<http://www.ntu.org/ntuf/about.html>> accessed on August 11, 2011.

² “State Auditor Vaudt Reviews Final Action Fiscal Year 2012 Budget,” Office

of the Auditor of State, <http://auditor.iowa.gov/press/Briefing_08-29-2011.pdf> accessed on August 29, 2011.

³ “Fiscal Notes,” Iowa Legislature General Assembly, <<http://www3.legis.state.ia.us/fiscalnotes/>> accessed on August 22, 2011.

⁴ “Bill Book,” Iowa Legislature, <<http://coolice.legis.state.ia.us/Cool-ICE/default.asp?category=billinfo&Service=Billbook>> accessed on August 23, 2011.

⁵ “State Auditor Vaudt Reviews Final Action Fiscal Year 2012 Budget,” Office of the Auditor of State, <http://auditor.iowa.gov/press/Briefing_08-29-2011.pdf> accessed on August 29, 2011.

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