



## FLORIDIANS FINALLY WILL GET A CHANCE TO SEE WHERE THEIR TAX MONEY GOES

BY REP. GREG EVERS

**A**s a member of the Florida House of Representatives for the past eight years, I understand how important it is to have as much valid information as possible when making decisions. Without enough appropriate information, public officials may make final decisions that fail to take into account important aspects of an issue. There are occasions when you are only as efficient as the information that you have available at a particular time.

Because it fills a need for timely and useful information, Transparency Florida is a valuable tool that all Floridians now have at their disposal. It is a website equipped with data

detailing Florida's financial situation. As a result, citizens will now be able to track how the state is using their tax dollars. Floridians will therefore be able to make their own determinations as to how efficiently our government is operating. Through the use of this new information system, Florida can once again take the lead in open government.

In an effort to improve the availability of information to the public, the Florida Legislature approved the Transparency Florida Act. One of the main components of the legislation was a web-based initiative aimed at providing citizens with useful information in a user-friendly

format. This handy new tool was intended to increase the public's access to information about state government spending and, eventually, by local governments and school districts. It makes available a wide array of data on government finances including expenditures, revenues, travel expenses, bonding information, salaries for more than 30 state agencies, and links to other web sites. The ultimate goal is to produce a system of government that encourages consumer feedback and increased participation.

Earlier this year, the new website was approved by members of the Joint Legislative Auditing Committee (JLAC), which was designated to oversee its implementation, and became available online. The website, [www.transparencyflorida.gov](http://www.transparencyflorida.gov), is designed to be directly accessible through the state's official website and to provide information relating to each appropriation in the General Appropriations Act for each branch of state government and for each state agency. It will eventually propose new phases of additional information to be made available and is expected to contain the latest state budget's data shortly after it takes effect each July 1. The website is also available on the Florida Senate website, with an introduction from Senate President Jeff Atwater. There is also a tour of the website and a


training overview that helps new users navigate.

Currently I co-chair the Committee, whose mission has been to create an improved system based on the premise that getting financial data and information into the hands of Floridians will lead to more efficient government. To this end, we were also charged with proposing additional phases of information to be compiled and made available online.


Once this information has been uploaded to the website, the Committee will then prepare a report to submit to the Governor, Senate President, and Speaker of the House of Representatives. The report will outline many of the recommendations that should be implemented to ensure that the legislative intent of transparency is further accomplished. While it will continue to be a work in progress, increased

access to financial data will result in greater transparency.

There are three main phases that are to be completed before the website becomes self-sustainable. The first phase focuses on providing citizens with appropriations data and expenditure data for all branches of state government and many of the larger school districts in the state. Through the use of generally accepted accounting principles, the information is available in a uniform standard that allows for users to



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easily view the financial statements of state agencies. The website will also include a breakdown of educational spending to analyze return on investment in order to determine the efficiency of measures of performance. This helpful breakdown will show the amount allocated to each of the components of Florida Educational Finance Plan (FEFP) funding formula for each school district. This part of the project is expected to be completed by August 1, 2010 for the upcoming school year.

The second phase of implementation includes financial reports of individual schools and a chart of accounts for all of the school districts. Also included in phase two are the salaries and benefits for state employees. Along with such operations data, a program cost analysis report highlights the costs associated with certain programs being offered. While a large majority of this information is already included on the Department of Education website, users can now access it on the Transparency Florida website along with other financial reports that are not currently posted online. This phase of the project is anticipated for completion by December 31, 2010.

Finally, the third phase represents the most challenging and difficult to implement as much of the information is not currently accessible on the Department of Education's

website. Phase three will require substantial financial resources to complete, which causes many critics to question whether the costs associated with implementing this massive undertaking are greater than the immediate benefits obtained from these resources. Many of the costs involve the development of infrastructure, networks, and personnel.

Recommendations from the Committee included adding additional information on a case-by-case basis. However, the Committee understands that its mission is to further the advancement of creating a more transparent budget process. Therefore, while there are substantial costs associated with this project, we believe that the cost savings that will be realized

once these policies are in place will provide a greater return on investment for tax dollars.

When the Committee met earlier this year to determine the timeline for implementation of the various phases, we recommended going forward with the first and second phases. It was the committee's position that the third phase could be implemented at a later date and that progress could be made at this time, but additional financial constraints on agencies and institutions would be too great a burden. While the first and second phase only required minimal and moderate capital

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virtually all of the major scholars in every emerging and established field of public policy research in the country, and many others around the world. Through this network, they can research and produce solid policy proposals quicker than anyone. You definitely want them in the room when writing a bill or negotiating with the other side on legislation.



### Reasons Why Free-Market Think Tanks Are Not Influential

1.

**No margin, no mission.** Think tanks are chronically underfunded, given the challenges we face as a nation. When one compares the billions spent on political campaigns, the

billions spent on lobbying, the billions spent on advertising, and the billions spent on all other public relations and public affairs, think tanks achieve more on a dollar-for-dollar basis than these traditional mechanisms *combined* yet scrape by with a fraction of the funding. **There is no more powerful entity to influence public policy than a well-funded think tank.** ❧

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investment, the costs associated with supplying education information for all 67 school districts, would be around \$9 million. Therefore, because the first two phases would represent significant progress, implementation of phase 3 would prove to be too difficult a financial challenge to achieve at the current time.

The Committee has recommended that once the school districts have complied with the implementation of financial transparency, then charter schools, universities and colleges, water management districts, counties,

and municipalities should be phased in. This would dramatically increase the overall transparency that is available to all citizens. At this point, there will be sufficient information for citizens instantly to be able to view where their tax dollars are going. Therefore, when this change is completed and the financial information of our state is available to all, it will undoubtedly be a bright and historic day for Florida. ❧

*Rep. Greg Evers has represented District 1 in the Florida House of Representatives for the past eight years.*