

# The Patriots News from the citizen advocates..

June 6, 2008

## **Will Budget Transparency Survive in Kansas?**

*By Jonathan Williams*

Last year, Kansas lawmakers took the lead with innovative legislation that created the first-in-the-nation budget transparency website for concerned taxpayers. Led by Rep. Kasha Kelley and Sen. Tim Huelskamp, this budget transparency legislation was truly groundbreaking.

However, because last year's legislation was attached to the budget, it is therefore set to expire after one year of existence. If nothing is done to renew this legislation, the newly developed [www.kansas.gov/kanview](http://www.kansas.gov/kanview) website could be short lived. This would mean that Kansas taxpayers would once again find themselves in the dark when attempting to research information on how their tax dollars are spent.

*As Thomas Jefferson once envisioned, "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."*

Jefferson's vision is now a reality for Kansas with the KanView website. With the advance of computer and network technologies, states all throughout this nation have the capacity to publish their yearly budgets on the Internet, providing taxpayers with a searchable, manageable report of all state expenditures from year to year. This is the central principle behind budget transparency legislation.

Budget transparency's ultimate aim is to see all information on states' budget expenditures provided in a readily accessible format so that any interested party can utilize this resource. In the past, government budgets were available in print, but the time necessary to mull through thousands of pages to track down relevant information was prohibitive. Budget transparency legislation solves this problem by providing taxpayers the ability to see where their tax dollars are going in a detailed, item-by-item manner, across all departments from any computer free of charge.

Over the last two years, budget transparency legislation has been introduced in numerous states and has enjoyed widespread support on a bipartisan basis. In 2007, while Kansas took the lead, more than eight states began implementing budget transparency, starting the process of establishing searchable online databases accessible to the general public. Apart from Kansas, several other states already have their transparency websites online.

One such example is the Missouri Accountability Portal, which was created by executive order of Governor Matt Blunt. On the site, one can search by agency, category, contract, and vendor to track down expenditures. The portal also contains data on state employee salaries and tax credits issued. The site is easily navigable and lists all expenditures per fiscal year, down to items that cost only a few dollars.

Another fine example is Oklahoma's OpenBooks website. This site was created as a result of the "Taxpayer Transparency Act," unanimously passed by the Oklahoma Legislature in 2007 and signed into law by Gov. Brad Henry. In addition to expenditure data on agencies, payroll, and vendors, the site also lists the funding sources for government agencies and programs.

In the first few months of operation alone, budget transparency websites have streamlined the process of budget research, reduced the burden of paperwork on state agencies, and generated millions of dollars demonstrating real public interest in such a service.

In 2008, lawmakers in more than 20 states are fighting for increased budget transparency. In the month alone, Mississippi and Washington have already given legislative approval to create search websites for taxpayers. Also this spring, Nevada governor Jim Gibbons and Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal have issued executive orders establishing budget transparency websites in their states. For the remainder of 2008, we expect many additional states will establish working databases of their own.

The issue of increasing budget transparency is not a partisan one. How else can one explain Barack Obama and Sen. Tom Coburn coming together to sponsor the federal budget transparency legislation? The issue of budget transparency and accountability is not about left vs. right, Republican vs. Democrat; it's about providing taxpayers with the relevant information they deserve. Kansas lawmakers consider the fate of the hugely popular KanView transparency website, let's just put partisanship aside and remember the taxpayer.

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