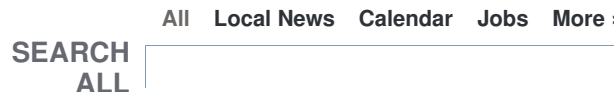


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School district should boost budget info

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In another episode of mid-Michigan's summer of financial discontent, the Lansing Board of Education voted for a \$177 million budget for next year. It slashes 10 percent of spending and eliminates 70 jobs - on top of the closure of two elementaries previously announced.

This budget process also illuminated one area where the school district can improve: Providing patrons with enough budget information to allow them to be informed participants in decisions.

There may have been more budget documents generated for the board this year than in any year in recent memory. According to school spokesman Steve Serkaian, board members asked for a great deal of detail as they confronted this crisis.

Good.

The district also made presentations at public meetings that sketched out the major problems.

And it posts to its Web site, <https://www.edline.net/pages/Lansing> SD, budget resolutions by the board.

However, these Web postings are rather out of the way. And they don't provide much context.


For example, would it help a patron to know that the original 2009 budget called for \$71 million in "basic programs" or \$703,000 in "community services"? That's a budgetary flyover at 35,000 feet, at best.

Now, this is representative democracy. The elected school board is supposed to act on behalf of the public. Citizens aren't going to go to a town meeting and do a line-by-line budget session. It's just a matter of practicality.


Lansing

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But technology, particularly the Internet, has changed the circumstances. Via Web sites and pdf files, it is now far easier for public agencies to post budget or other data. In fact, it's possible now to inundate the public with information.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free market think tank in Midland, has been running a "Show Michigan the Money" Project, in which public agencies are encouraged to place financial documents online as a matter of routine. (Go to www.showmichiganthemoney.org for more info.) A typical posting now is a district's checkbook - what it's paying for routine items.

It should be possible, even for Lansing in its current restricted situation, to work at putting more budgetary detail in the public's hands. In turn, more information should lead to more input from the public on prioritizing precious dollars.

As difficult as this budget year was, next year will be as tough or tougher. The Lansing School District should start planning now to give patrons as much detail as they can about the scope of the crisis - and the options still available.

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