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Published: April 30, 2009 06:45 am 

Editorial: Standardize money reporting

It's a simple premise. Taxpayers, the people who pay the bills, should be able to see how the money is being spent. Simple, of course, can be complicated.

The Mackinac Center, a Midland-based conservative think tank, has backed an effort it calls "Show Michigan the Money" that calls on elected officials to open their office budgets and payrolls, along with government budgets, to the public.

Partly in response to the effort, a few school districts and local governments have put their check registers online so anyone with access to the Internet can follow, check by check, who the district or county board is writing checks to. Others have put budgets and other financial data online.

The result is a forest of forms, numbers and formats that would challenge an accountant.

Individual elected officials, particularly at the state level, have done better.

Michigan House Minority Leader Kevin Elsenheimer, R-Kewadin, has published on his Web site (www.kevinelsenheimer.com) the names and salaries of the 11 public employees working directly for him. According to the Mackinac Center, Elsenheimer reveals all the details of his nearly \$438,000 annual staffing budget.

No politician in state government is so transparent about a public payroll of this size, according to Kenneth M. Braun, director of the Mackinac Center's "Show Michigan the Money" project.

Freshman State Rep. Wayne Schmidt, a Traverse City Republican, has a Web site (<http://house.mi.gov/ws Schmidt>) in which he lists his salary and office allowance plus his spending on mailing, printing, travel, publications, phone and other expenditures.

State Rep. Dan Scripps, D-Leland, another freshman, has proposed a bill that would create a publicly accessible Web site that details state spending. The site would include state expenditures broken down by department, wages paid to state employees, state contracts, the executive budget and annual reports.

This is a major step forward. But it's only half the story. What we must also know is who is bankrolling political campaigns with the hope of later influence. Knowing the what -- how much -- is important; knowing the who completes the picture.

Further, such knowledge loses much of its impact if it's delayed by weeks and months, as is currently the case. What Michigan needs is a real-time, totally transparent campaign finance system that records contributions as soon as they're made and includes information on who made the contribution, who (if anyone) that person is representing, and total contributions in an election cycle.

Transparency is more than the buzzword of the moment. We now have powerful tools, like the Internet and e-mail, that allow us near-instant access to information on where campaign money is coming from and government money is going. It's time to



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