



## AMERICANS *for* TAX REFORM

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*President*

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Dear Florida State Legislator,

I write to urge you to lend your support to current legislative efforts to bring greater transparency into the Sunshine State's finances, both at the state and local level, as spearheaded by Rep. Gayle Harrell (R- Port St. Lucie) and Sen. Ronda Storms (R-Brandon).

Florida has long been a leader on general government transparency with its tradition of "Government in the Sunshine." Governor Crist's administration has realized that these open record requirements need to be taken into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and has taken several important steps to increase access to government records and meetings by making use of the technological advances.

The maturing and expansion of the Internet makes it possible for you to improve constituents' ability to access information specifically in the area of government expenditures, too, and I would encourage you to seize this opportunity to empower taxpayers to become fiscal watchdogs.

In 2007, five states (Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and to a more limited extent Minnesota and Hawaii) passed legislation that mandates the creation of comprehensive websites for state expenditures. In most cases, these bills enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Several other states including Texas, Missouri and South Carolina have already taken executive action or are looking to do so.

Several of the websites mandated by legislative or executive action have already gone live, and provide taxpayers with an opportunity to track their tax dollars at a mouse-click (*see ATR memo on state, federal and local efforts to increase transparency in government spending, available at [www.atr.org](http://www.atr.org)*).

But the transparency in government spending movement is not limited to federal and state-level efforts. Currently 58 Texas school districts are posting their check registers online, with more districts expected to follow.

Ideally, Florida's spending transparency web portal would provide taxpayers with direct access to comprehensive information on state-level expenditures, along with access to the actual expenditure document. Beyond that, taxpayers should be able to access their local government websites, which should in turn be required to disclose their expenditures on their own websites.

**This spending transparency effort is consistent with the Founding Fathers' notion of accountable government:** It was Thomas Jefferson, who once said: *"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."*

Creating such a website would provide Florida taxpayers with a tool to access, search and easily find relevant spending information, and ultimately foster a better understanding of the ways in which government operates. Ultimately, it will help reduce fraud, waste and abuse. Opacity in the way government spends tax dollars often leaves taxpayers frustrated, and can create the perception of possible abuse of the system.

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More public scrutiny will help eliminate impropriety in dealing with taxpayer dollars – be it perceived or real impropriety. Ultimately, taxpayers will be best served when all levels of government – federal, state and local - are required to disclose their expenditures in a clear and searchable public format.

Those opposed to greater transparency have raised the argument that the creation of such a website will be extremely costly. However, this argument is merely a red herring, as proven by the experiences of other states, and even the federal government:

- *The Missouri Accountability Portal, an expenditure website created via executive order by Gov. Matt Blunt, was created without the appropriation of a single additional tax dollar.*
- *The Oklahoma website, which just went live on December 28, 2007 and can be accessed at [www.openbooks.ok.gov](http://www.openbooks.ok.gov), was created at a price tag of \$300,000.*
- *Even the federal grant and contract website which was unveiled in December and is accessible at [www.USASpending.gov](http://www.USASpending.gov) was put together at a price tag of less than \$1 million - and that covers grants and contracts of the entire federal government. The software that was used to create the federal site will soon be available as open source software.*
- *Companies like Google and Microsoft have offered to partner with states in their endeavours to make government spending information more accessible, helping to further defray cost.*

Americans for Tax Reform has been working closely with lawmakers, activists and interested parties in the states to increase accountability and transparency in government finance, and we will be happy to assist you in any way we can, and look forward to working with you to empower Florida taxpayers.

In passing legislation that creates a single searchable website for state expenditures and requires localities to disclose their expenditures on their interlinking websites, Florida can once again lead the way for the country, and can pride itself of its nickname “Sunshine State” through more than just the climate.

Onward,



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