

Let the Sun Shine in DuPage

I am pleased that State Senator Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale) supports making Illinois government more transparent by creating an on-line database with all state contracts, public employee salaries, etc. (HB4765 - Illinois Accountability Portal). I wholeheartedly agree. This is not a voyeuristic exercise, but a legitimate way for citizens to keep track of their tax dollars. After all, government employees should be hired based on what they know, not nepotism. Government contracts should be awarded based on merit, not campaign contributions.

Now if only Senator Dillard could convince his friend and Chairman of the DuPage County Board Robert Schillerstrom to do the same thing here in DuPage. Currently, in order to find out anything about personnel, employee salaries, or vendor contracts in DuPage County, taxpayers are required to make a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request which consists of finding the right county department, filling out the proper form, waiting, and then playing a cat-and-mouse game on whether the FOIA request was worded properly. The entire process seems to be designed to thwart transparency, rather than to enhance it.

On January 22, 2008, I stood on the steps of the county building with my fellow Democratic candidates for County Board and called upon the DuPage County Board to create a web-based database of all county personnel and county contracts. I repeat that call for transparency today.

If Schillerstrom and the County Board have nothing to hide, then they should embrace the idea of making DuPage County government more transparent and more easily accessible to taxpayers.

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Citizens need this portal to accountability

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You've just filed your Illinois tax return. And you're more than a little angry about how much you've paid in state taxes given the fiscal shenanigans in Springfield.

So you'd like to find out exactly how your tax dollars are being spent. But there is no easy way to track state spending. Of course, there isn't. Not in Illinois, where it's best to keep this information in the dark.

But some state lawmakers, along with the watchdog group Americans for Prosperity, want to give the public a tool to readily identify how state tax dollars are being spent. Under legislation before the General Assembly, the state would be required to create an "Illinois Accountability Portal" database on the Internet.

If you want to see how such a database would greatly increase transparency in state government, visit mapyourtaxes.mo.gov. That is the state of Missouri's accountability portal, held up as an example of what can be done in Illinois.

Missouri citizens can find out exactly how much is being spent on salaries -- both agency-wide and what specific individuals are being paid. They can get information on what is being spent, specifically, on travel, debt service, leases, to name a few. They can find out who is benefiting from state tax credits. They can get information on state contracts.

The federal government has a similar portal, USAspending.gov. Sen. Barack Obama helped lead the effort to get this Web site created.

Illinois citizens could certainly benefit from being able to shine this kind of bright, expansive spotlight on state spending. Members of the Illinois House certainly think so. The bill creating the Illinois Accountability Portal, sponsored by state Reps. Mike Tryon, a Crystal Lake Republican, and Jack Franks, a Woodstock Democrat, passed on a 108-0 vote.

State Sens. Kirk Dillard, a Hinsdale Republican, and Pamela Althoff, also a Crystal Lake Republican, are hoping for similar success in their chamber.

"If there is a state that badly needs access to this information, it is Illinois," Dillard said.

He's right. The vampire that has for so long sucked the life out of honest, efficient government in Illinois needs to be put into the destructive light of the sun.

But there is some fear that the bill will not even make it out of the Senate Rules Committee, let alone be endorsed by Senate President Emil Jones and put out for a vote.

We see no reason to oppose this bill. The portal, which we hope could be imported into standard database programs, could be put in place for \$100,000 or less. So cost is no issue. Unions representing front-line state workers say revealing their salaries would be an invasion of privacy. We don't see that, given state workers are public employees. Their salaries should be no secret. Legislation similar to this one got support in the last legislative session, though some lawmakers held off, saying they wanted a better bill. This one is better.

The prevailing view should be that a state citizenry that has seen more than its share of wasteful, extravagant spending in state government, not to mention corruption, should be given a chance to see, for themselves, how their wages that go to taxes are being spent. Only a state senator who fears accountability would keep this bill from becoming law.