



Working to Increase Government Transparency

By Deborah D. Thornton

“Let the sunshine, let the sunshine in, the sunshine in
Oh, let it shine, c’mon
Now everybody just sing along
Let the sun shine in”¹

The Fifth Dimension, “Aquarius/Let the Sunshine in” 1969

As Iowans begin to enjoy the welcome sunshine of spring, the lyrics from the old *Fifth Dimension* song seem especially appropriate, as the “sunshine” movement of government transparency sweeps through the nation.

It started in 2005 in Indiana, with Governor Mitch Daniels’ Executive Order 05-07 requiring state contract information be posted on the internet.² Governor Daniels, former Director of the Office of Management and Budget under President George W. Bush, was elected in 2004 on a platform of government accountability and efficiency. Keeping his campaign promises, Executive Order 05-07 was signed two days after he was sworn as Governor. Information to be posted included the total number of state contracts entered into each year, the entire text of contracts, the total amount of dollars awarded under these contracts, and the number and percentage of Indiana businesses versus out-of-state businesses who were awarded contracts.³

Then President Bush signed the “Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act” (S.2590) in fall of 2006. This legislation created a free, publicly searchable website for all federal government contracts and grants of more than \$25,000. This website became available on December 13, 2007, just over a year later, at www.usaspending.gov. President Bush referred to it as being able to “Google your tax dollars.”⁴

During 2007, five states — Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Hawaii — all joined the “sunshine” movement by passing legislation creating online databases detailing state government expenditures. This information includes agency expenses, grants, and contracts.⁵ Other Governors have also been proactive in welcoming sunshine to their operations, including Matt Blunt (R), Missouri; Rick Perry (R), Texas; Mark Sanford (R), South Carolina; Sarah Palin (R), Alaska; Brad Henry (D), Oklahoma; and Bobby Jindal (R) of Louisiana.⁶

In their February 8, 2008, update, Americans for Tax Reform detailed legislative or executive level government transparency activities (anticipated or ongoing) during 2008 in 34 states. Iowa was not listed. However Minnesota, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, and South Dakota were.⁷

Most recently, Louisiana Governor Jindal focused on government transparency in his special legislative session on ethics. During this session, the Louisiana Legislature passed and he signed Senate Bill 37, requiring the Commissioner of Administration to establish and maintain a website of state spending. The website details the nature and amount of appropriations for the executive branch, including the salaries and total compensations of all statewide elected officials and cabinet-level positions, is updated monthly, and includes budgeting, spending, and performance information.⁸ Angela Davis, Louisiana Commissioner of Administration, stated that this bill is “a great tool to make sure government is not only ethical but accountable, by empowering four million citizen auditors to monitor what the state spends and to judge whether it’s wise.” In demonstrating overwhelming support for Governor Jindal’s efforts to reform and improve Louisiana’s historic culture of cronyism and corruption, the Senate voted 33-1 and the House voted 93-1 in favor of the bill.⁹ Transparency is not a partisan effort, as demonstrated in Oklahoma, where in 2007 both the State Senate and House unanimously passed and Democrat Governor Brad Henry signed transparency legislation.¹⁰

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Though we've wondered for some months if sunshine was ever going to return to Iowa, there are sunshine activities going on in state government. The Iowa Department of Administrative Procurement Services provides a listing of all contracts they sign at <http://das.gse.iowa.gov/contracts/allcontracts.html>. Though the full text of contracts is provided, the actual amount of materials or services bought and paid for are not listed. A contract for promotional materials might read "less than \$10,000 per order," but there is no way of telling if one or one hundred orders of less than \$10,000 have been placed. A key to full fiscal transparency is the requirement for searchable databases of all checks actually generated by the government in paying for goods and services.

In support of this need, House File (HF) 2439, the "Taxpayer Transparency Act," was introduced on February 28, 2008, by Representative Jamie Van Fossen (R-Davenport). It clearly and succinctly outlines the requirements for taxpayers to have "easy" access to information on "how the state is spending their tax dollars," including performance results. The legislation directs the Iowa Department of Management to establish by January 1, 2010, a free, searchable budget database web site detailing all expenditures of state government with hyperlinks to the grant or contract language and to update the database at least annually, within 30 days of the close of the fiscal year. HF2439 has been assigned to the State Government committee.¹¹ Representative Van Fossen recently said, "Iowa taxpayers deserve to be able to hold their government accountable in spending their hard-earned money."¹²

Though he probably would not have appreciated the lyrics of "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine in," American revolutionary Patrick Henry addressed the core of this problem, stating, "[T]he liberties of a people never were, or ever will be, secure when the transactions of their rulers may be concealed from them."¹³ Hopefully the Iowa Legislature will agree with him in enacting HF 2439, and Governor Culver will follow trailblazers like Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal and sign it.

Endnotes

¹ "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine in," The Fifth Dimension, 1969, <<http://www.classicbands.com/Fifth.html>> (February 26, 2008).

² State of Indiana, Executive Order 05-07, <http://www.in.gov/gov/files/EO_05-07_Log_Contracts_on_Internet.pdf> (February 28, 2008).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Signs Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act," September 26, 2006, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060926.html>> (March 3, 2008).

⁵ Americans for Tax Reform, "Transparency in Government Spending," <www.atr.org> (February 26, 2008).

⁶ Americans for Tax Reform, "Comprehensive Memo: State, Federal, and Local Efforts to Increase Transparency in Government Spending," <www.atr.org> (February 28, 2008).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Louisiana Legislature Passes Online State Spending Database," Bayou Buzz, February 25, 2008, <http://www.bayoubuzz.com/News/Louisiana/Government/Louisiana_Legislature_Passes_Online_State_Spending_Database__5884.asp> (February 26, 2008).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Americans for Tax Reform, "Transparency Trail Blazer in Oklahoma," April 12, 2007, <<http://www.atr.org/content/pdf/2007/april/041207pr-ok-trailblazer.pdf>> (March 3, 2008).

¹¹ House File 2439, Iowa General Assembly BillBook, February 28, 2008, <<http://coolice.legis.state.ia.us/Cool-ICE/default.asp?Category=billinfo&Service=Billbook&menu=false&ga=82&hbill=HF2439>> (February 29, 2008).

¹² Internet conversation with State Representative Jamie Van Fossen, March 3, 2008.

¹³ "Patrick Henry quotes," ThinkExist.com, <http://thinkexist.com/quotes/patrick_henry/> (February 29, 2008).

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