



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Jackie Borchart
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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- More than 100 local governments added their expenditures to the state's online checkbook on Thursday, a move Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel hopes will spark other local entities open their books to taxpayers.

Spending data for 114 cities, counties, townships, school districts, and special districts are available on the state's website, OhioCheckbook.com. Expenditures can be viewed by spending category or vendor, with the ability to drill down to individual transactions. The checkbook data can be shared on social media sites and downloaded in spreadsheet form for more analysis.

Earlier this year, Mandel asked 3,962 municipalities to put checkbook-level expenses online as he did with state expenses last year. Mandel said more than 300 local governments have committed to the project.

Mandel said he has told local officials across the state they have a choice.

"Do they want to be Blockbuster video or do they want to be Netflix? Do they want to be taxicabs or do they want to be Uber? Because the reality is technology is changing so quick, it's shifting beneath the feet of public officials," Mandel said. "And the choice they all have is whether or not they want to be part of the past or part of the future."

Mandel noted several times that the 60 or so local government officials and good government advocates attending the press conference included Republicans and Democrats who disagree on many other issues. Former Ohio Treasurer Kevin Boyce, the Democrat Mandel beat in a heated 2010 election contest, also lent his support to the initiative.

Boyce said making expenditures easily accessible to reporters and taxpayers will make government more efficient and ethical.

"The idea that would put our checkbook online is something I think will move the needle in terms of the public's confidence in government, even if just a little bit," Boyce said.

Ohiocheckbook.com includes spending data from every state agency and elected office dating back to the 2007-08 fiscal year. Users can explore the database through a variety of methods including a search engine style search bar.

Local government data will be managed by California-based OpenGov. Last month, Mandel requested to use \$2.7 million from his office budget to pay for the first two years of the local government checkbook project. That covers a one-time \$975,000 licensing fee and an annual maintenance fee of between \$400,000 to \$950,000 depending on how many entities sign up.

Jodi Karhoff, fiscal officer of the North Baltimore Public Library system in Wood County, said small entities such as hers wouldn't be able to participate without the state funding.

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"In our small town we're the information center of the community, so why not put out there what we're doing with their tax dollars," Karhoff said.

The state's checkbook cost about \$811,000 to set up, according to the treasurer's office. Since the checkbook launched in early December 2014, more than 330,000 searches have been made. The state checkbook earned the highest rating in the country in a 2015 U.S. Public Interest Research Group report.

The state checkbook went longer than six months without an update, but now will be updated monthly with a 45- to 60- day lag. Local governments will have to update their checkbooks annually but can update quarterly or semi-annually.

After spending more than 10 minutes thanking local governments for their participation, Mandel took jabs at Ohio's pension funds for declining to join the effort.

"I tell them -- this information is already a matter of public record. All we're doing is using technology to put information online that's already a matter of public record," Mandel said.

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