



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Dina Berliner
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More than 100 local governments and school districts have agreed to put all their financial information online for Ohio taxpayers to see.

That information, along with sweeping fiscal data from the state, can be found at OhioCheckbook.com, which was launched by state Treasurer Josh Mandel last year.

The website allows users to search entities — including counties, cities, villages and school districts — and view their financial information, which can then be shared on social media or saved as a file.

The initiative has seen support from both sides of the aisle, including former state Treasurer Kevin Boyce, a Democratic lawmaker who Republican Mandel defeated in 2010.

"It's not common that people who ran against each other, who were former campaign rivals, would then stand shoulder to shoulder at a press conference," Mandel said today.

The creation of the website landed Ohio the No. 1 spot as the most transparent state in the U.S. for providing online access to government spending, according to the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. Ohio was previously ranked 46th on the same list.

Since its launch in December, the website has seen more than 325,000 searches. It now includes information totaling more than \$473 billion in spending during the past eight years.

The state initially paid a \$975,000 fee for the website's software and will pay between \$400,000 and \$950,000 every year to maintain it depending on the number of entities involved, according to Mandel's staff.

"The current treasurer has had a tremendous idea," Boyce said. "The idea of opening up our government to the public, to reporters, so that everything is done transparently makes for a better, more effective government and, most importantly, a more ethical government."

Newly added entities to the checkbook program include Franklin County, the Hilliard school district and the city of New Albany.

"We here in Franklin County today are confident that the public will be proud of what they find," said county Auditor Clarence Mingo. "We also appreciate the need to be held accountable and so far as we have government tax dollars, and then so far as our responsibility to use those tax dollars must be done in a way that is both wise and lawful."

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Mandel said his office is still in working to get even more entities involved. That includes state universities, the majority of which Mandel said have not opposed the idea of joining. The only one to officially commit to the initiative is Central State University, Mandel said.

However, not all entities have been enthusiastic about putting their records on the website, most notably the Ohio Public Employees Retirement System. Several large cities such as Columbus have also not committed to the initiative.

"I think it begs the question, 'What do they have to hide?'" Mandel said of OPERS' refusal. "This information is already a matter of public record. All we're doing is using technology to put information online."

The pension system rebutted Mandel's assertion that they were hiding anything, saying in a statement that they welcomed the treasurer to a June meeting after initiating participation in the checkbook program.

"We fully support transparency as evidenced by the extensive information available on the OPERS website" and other information provided to various state entities, Executive Director Karen Carraher said in a statement. "We are not hiding anything. To suggest otherwise is an unfortunate characterization."

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