



# JOSH MANDEL

## STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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By Bob Finnan  
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A famous line in the movie "All the President's Men" is spoken by an informant who says, "Follow the money."

Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel's continuing initiative called OhioCheckbook.com was set up to allow taxpayers to do just that.

"The whole point of it is to empower taxpayers," said Seth Unger, a representative of the treasurer's office. "(Mandel) likes to say we're creating an army of citizen auditors that are able to hold their elected officials accountable."

The website Wednesday added two Medina County townships &mdash; Lafayette and Hinckley &mdash; to its growing list of government entities that are using it so there is more transparency on how government money is spent.

Lafayette and Hinckley are the only townships in Medina County that have joined OhioCheckbook.com. Medina Schools already is on board. Brunswick Schools and the city of Wadsworth have agreed to join, but are not yet online.

Mandel launched the program in December 2014.

"I believe the people of Medina County have a right to know how their tax money is being spent and I applaud local leaders here for partnering with my office to post the finances on Ohiocheckbook.com," Mandel said in a prepared statement.

Unger said there are more than 139 million checks shown on the website &mdash; from an expenditure of just \$2 for pencils at Staples to \$2 million for a road construction contract.

Unger said Mandel started the initiative when he took office in 2011. At that time, Ohio was ranked 46th in the nation in government transparency as measured by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. Recently, the state ranking moved to No. 1, with credit going to OhioCheckbook.com.

"Nowadays, people don't want to come to a fiscal office and go through your file cabinets," Unger said. "They want to be able to go on their smartphone or tablet."

Unger said there are 3,962 government entities in Ohio. As of Wednesday, 627 of them have joined, including 79 townships and 71 school districts.

"The only way it was going to be successful was if we paid for it in the treasurer's office and made it available free of charge," Unger said. "This gives taxpayers and the public a view into their government's spending they've never seen before."



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Hinckley Township Fiscal Officer Colleen Swedyk said it was quite easy to load her township's numbers onto the website.

"This is so much more user-friendly for people to interpret what we're actually doing with the money," she said.

"I think once other townships and entities see how easy it was for us to get on and how great it looks, in a year or two you'll have everyone on."

Unger said that was Mandel's goal.

"We've tried to eliminate any excuses or barriers," he said. "We've tried to make it hard for them to say no."

Unger said the program could improve how the public views government.

"One of the real goals of this project is to increase public trust," he said. "Right now, believe it or not, public trust in government is at an all-time low. This initiative will help raise that."

"It's not transparency for transparency's sake. This will have a positive effect on the community."

Lafayette Township Trustee Lynda Bowers agreed with Swedyk, who also serves as Medina County recorder.

"This is as easy as painting by the numbers," Bowers said. "People can open it up and know what the numbers mean."

"We've been on the phone with Treasurer Mandel's office since the first press release that he was going to do it."

Bowers said Lafayette Township has nothing to hide.

"We are very proud of how lean we run," she said. "Lafayette operates without all those excessive levies that many of those townships have. We don't have a road levy, an operating levy or a cemetery levy. We live within our means. We want our residents to know where their money is going and how it's spent."

Bowers said she'll also compare numbers for communities that are her township's size.

Unger said one official, for instance, checked how much other area communities paid for rock salt.

He said this program could change the way public officials operate.

"It's all going to be out there in plain sight," he said. "It's changing behavior of public employees. We're opening books that have been closed in the past."



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