



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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It took more than a year to accomplish, but the internet posting of Mahoning County government's payroll is without a doubt one of the most significant public-policy initiatives in the history of the region. It is government transparency at its finest.

By giving the taxpayers access to the ledger, county officials are signaling that they have no secrets when it comes to the expenditure of public dollars. Indeed, we believe that with the payroll information on the OhioCheckbook website — it is the brainchild of state Treasurer Josh Mandel — other local governments and public entities should follow suit. If they don't, they will suffer the wrath of their constituents for maintaining the veil of secrecy.

Treasurer Mandel, who has certainly earned the appreciation of all Ohioans advocating open, honest government, came to Youngstown last week and joined county officials at a news conference to announce the addition of the payroll information online.

"Shining sunlight on spending and empowering taxpayers to hold politicians accountable has nothing to do with partisan politics," Mandel said. "It's all about power to the people."

In April 2015, the state treasurer paid a similar visit to Youngstown, but then it was to announce that Mahoning County would be the first county in Ohio to put its checkbook online.

Mandel, a Republican, praised the three Democratic commissioners, Anthony Traficanti, Carol Rimedio-Righetti and David Ditzler, and the county's Republican auditor, Ralph Meacham, for leading the way statewide.

But, as we noted in an editorial at the time, taxpayers would view the omission of current payroll information, including employee salaries, raises and bonuses, as nothing more than government obfuscation.

Our displeasure over the absence of full disclosure of county government's financial transactions was reflected in several subsequent editorials. Our argument was simply this: There's no reason to withhold such information considering that salaries of all state employees and public school and state university employees were on the internet even before Mandel launched OhioCheckbook.com in 2014.

REASONS FOR DELAY

But last week, Meacham, who was elected auditor by running on a platform of government transparency and promising honest public service, explained that the delay in posting payroll information stemmed from a change in county payroll directors. In addition, the county had to make sure it was in compliance with the demands and deadlines of the Affordable Care Act as they pertain to payroll and benefits.

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But now, with the information just a mouse click away, taxpayers in Mahoning County can see for themselves the job titles, departments and 2015 annual salaries of the 1,996 employees.

Given that salaries total \$73 million, private-sector taxpayers can now determine if they're getting their money's worth from the public servants.

As Ohio Treasurer Mandel has said, the OhioCheckbook is all about transparency and accountability.

There have been more than 578,000 searches on the site since December 2015, but the participation rate of local jurisdictions is rather disappointing.

There are 3,962 local public entities, but just 761 have signed on. Together, these local governments and schools combine to have online more than 18.7 million individual transactions and more than \$44.1 billion in total spending.

Mahoning County joins Beaver Township as the only local governments in the Mahoning Valley that have posted their salary information.

There are four counties in Ohio that now make available payroll information on the internet: Mahoning, Clermont, Cuyahoga and Lorain.

We have long advocated lifting the veil of secrecy that has prevented Valley residents from an up-close look at the inner workings of local governments. Such secrecy has facilitated years of public corruption.

Ohio Treasurer Mandel's OhioCheckbook website holds out the promise of honest government. Of particular interest are the contracts entered into by the public entities.

Mahoning County commissioners Traficanti, Rimedio-Righetti and Ditzler and Auditor Meacham have shown a commitment to full disclosure of county government's finances.

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