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## **A promising, and discouraging, sign for open government**

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Legislation pending in Washington offers both a promising sign for the transparency movement and a discouraging reminder that some will always try to impede open-government reform.

First, the promising sign: Last year, in a nearly unanimous vote, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill which would make it easier for ordinary citizens to track how taxpayer dollars are spent. Four years in the making, the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act calls for all federal spending details – including itemized, checkbook-level transactions – to be made available on a central website. Importantly, this financial information would be maintained in an easy-to-understand format, downloadable, and free to the public. It would be updated monthly.

While the bill passed the House with ease, the Senate has yet to take a vote. Open-government advocates hope the Senate will vote on it soon.

The bill is bi-partisan, sponsored by two Republicans and two Democrats.

Now, the bad news: In late January, some media outlets reported that the White House is pushing for major revisions which would seriously weaken – or even sink – this good-government legislation. According to the media reports, a leaked document from the White House Office of Management and Budget shows the administration wants the Senate to strip the bill of certain requirements and delay its implementation. In addition, the White House wants the financial information to be updated only quarterly, rather than monthly.

Supporters of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act say these revisions would undercut its purpose. For example, the White House seeks to remove one of the bill's key components – the requirement for uniform, government-wide methods of maintaining financial information. But without a standardized format for data, the goal of making federal government-wide spending information easily available – and easily understandable – to the public would be impossible to meet.

Even some in the President's own party are angry. "The Obama administration talks a lot about transparency, but these comments reflect a clear attempt to gut the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act," said U.S. Senator Mark Warner, a Democratic sponsor of the bill, in a statement to the news media.

When the S.C. Comptroller's Office unveiled our state's first Transparency Website several years ago, we were at the forefront of a national movement to make government spending details accessible via the Internet. At the time, very few states had such websites. (In fact, many people within government considered the idea to be too radical.)

Since then, however, the notion of online financial disclosure has taken hold. From local towns and counties, to state and federal government, ordinary citizens are being given click-of-a-mouse access to itemized expenditures, budgets, contracts, grant awards and other information. And as technology continually improves, it's easier than ever to collect and publish government data.

The Digital Accountability and Transparency Act represents one of the biggest steps ever taken toward open, accountable government.

Washington's not a place where wisdom often prevails, but let's hope the U.S. Senate has the wisdom to reject any effort to water down such a worthwhile proposal.

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