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Converting state government to 'Transparency 2.0'

by Richard Eckstrom
Contributing Columnist

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"Transparency" has become just another buzzword to some in government these days.

A few years ago, before it ever became a government buzzword, I launched a project to make the details of how government spends money readily available and transparent to citizens in South Carolina.

As the state's comptroller general — more commonly described as its chief financial officer — it seemed only natural to me that South Carolinians ought to be able to see the full picture of how government officials are spending the public's hard-earned tax dollars.

After all, it's my job to make sure the state's books are balanced and to keep an eye on how public money is spent. That's why I created the South Carolina Fiscal Transparency website.

Available on my office's website at www.cg.sc.gov, the Fiscal Transparency site contains lots of details on expenditures by state agencies, school districts, state-supported colleges and universities, many local governments, and the billions of stimulus dollars the state received.

The site is searchable and user friendly. Think of it as an online, information warehouse where you can quickly learn, for example, how much any particular state agency paid in bonuses last year, or which companies any state agency has done business with.

I'm calling attention to our Fiscal Transparency website for a couple of reasons.

The first, and most important reason, is to let people know about it. I'm guessing a lot of folks aren't familiar with the site, and I want South Carolinians to know it's there to help them, whether as full-time citizen watchdogs over public spending or as casually inquiring minds.

People often have questions about where and how their tax dollars are spent, and not all officials who have the answers are forthcoming with them at times.

That's how the Fiscal Transparency website can help by providing people with lots of answers without getting the runaround in the process.

The second reason, and this is a big challenge for me and my staff, is that finding ways to provide better transparency is a continuing process. It's not like we created this website and that's the end of it. Quite to the contrary, transparency is an ongoing, constantly evolving thing.

I've compared it to sweeping a floor. The first time you sweep it, you get a pretty big pile. But you surely miss some things. So you go back, sweep it again and get another little pile; then again and you get a little bit more; then a little more, and a little more, and on and on it goes.

To give you a real-world example, when I implemented South Carolina's first Transparency website it was pretty cutting edge. Just a few other states had something like it, and best of all we didn't spend any "new money" to build it. We did it with existing resources.

Then, over the next few years, more and more states joined the transparency wave. Some of them spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to create their high-octane sites with all kinds of fancy bells and whistles. But that wasn't what we thought we should do, especially because our economy was in a downturn at the time.

But because transparency best practices are always improving, we're now working on upgrading our site from its initial basic version to what some have called "Transparency 2.0."

Along these lines, I've recently added new information on tax credits, also known as tax expenditures, and economic development incentives the state gives, and I plan to continue making other enhancements. We're always looking for ways to make the site more informative and useful.

Please join me in this effort. Visit the site and if you have any comments or suggestions to make it more useful, please contact my office at (803) 734-2538 or cgooffice@cg.sc.gov.

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Transparency has to be more than a buzzword. It needs to be the way government does business every day.

Richard Eckstrom, a CPA, is the comptroller general of South Carolina and commander of the S.C. State Guard.

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