



## Improving transparency site is never-ending challenge

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APRIL 11, 2014 -- There's a lot of talk these days about private citizens feeling that government doesn't understand their concerns and that political decisions often cater to special interests over their personal interests. Some say this makes them feel suspicious, even cynical.



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In this time of growing tension between governments and the citizens they govern, government reformers are developing new tools to better communicate with citizens and to connect them with the governing process.

Of course, the Internet helps a lot in this regard.

My agency, the Comptroller General's Office, has developed an easy-to-use online tool for interested citizen to use to track state government spending with the click of a mouse. We call this tool the S.C. Fiscal Transparency Website, and it's all about helping people hold government officials more accountable for how they spend public money.

The heart of [the site](#) is a mammoth database that contains spending transactions between 80-plus agencies and thousands of vendors. But the Transparency Website has many other components, too, including monthly reports of purchases made using state charge cards; and pages with links to the online check registers of every school district and state-supported colleges and universities in South Carolina.

"Transparency" is often thrown around as a buzzword in government circles today. You've probably heard it used, and you might even know

about our Transparency Website. But new ideas and methods of transparency are constantly developing and we're constantly seeking ways to improve our site. After all, today's best practices in transparency are far more advanced than when we launched the state's first Transparency Website in early 2008.

We've recently added several new features to the site. These new features make our site more informative and user-friendly for anyone, whether a concerned citizen monitoring government spending or a member of the media conducting in-depth research.

Unlike transparency websites in many states, we haven't sought any additional money to develop and maintain this site, relying instead on our in-house staff and existing resources. Here are some of our recent key improvements to the site and how they're helpful:

- **State spending:** This database has two new search features. One allows users to search and view payments to vendors for all state agencies combined. Previously a vendor search could be performed only agency-by-agency, rather than in a single statewide search as is now possible. The other new search feature allows users to examine each agency's annual spending by selecting major categories like personal services, office supplies, travel and many others.
- **State contracts:** A wealth of state contracting information already was available through the state Procurement Services Division website, but folks need to know how to find what they're looking for. Our improved Transparency Website's new State Contracts page provides a road map for navigating this information.
- **Local governments:** The site also features a page containing links to check registers of many cities and counties and to all school districts in South Carolina. We've increased the number of participating cities and counties across the state by reaching out and helping them as they join the transparency movement.
- **Economic development subsidies:** This is one of the biggest new frontiers in transparency, but it's also an area where South Carolina has been lacking because state law prohibits disclosing specific economic development benefits provided to companies. We feel the state should be disclosing, at a minimum, the return on investment to taxpayers – measured by additional jobs created and private capital invested – in exchange for the economic development subsidies to a private company. Using the most recent information publicly available, we've compiled and added two searchable and downloadable reports to the Transparency Website. These two reports provide details on state grants from the Governor's Closing Fund and on projects approved for state job development tax credits.
  - For a summary of all Transparency Website upgrades [click here](#).

I invite you to visit the site and provide your feedback on how to improve it. An easy way to do so is through a Citizen Input form accessible through the Comptroller General's Office website.

We'll continue to improve the Transparency Website and look for ways to make government in South Carolina more transparent at all levels. It's a challenge that never ends.

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