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Richard ECKSTROM

My office was pleased to receive national attention recently for our efforts to shed light on how your tax dollars are spent.

The state's fiscal transparency website was ranked among the top 10 in the country by a prominent government watchdog organization, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. The group, which advocates transparency as a tool to hold government accountable, reviewed the transparency sites of all 50 states and issued grades based on how well states make detailed spending information available to the public.

Our site – an “online check register” showing state agencies’ detailed expenditures – earned a B+ on the group’s “Following the Money” report. But more importantly, we were one of just three states to receive the top score in what they call a “Real World” evaluation, which tests the websites’ comprehensiveness and usability. That study used focus groups that included professional and amateur researchers who were asked to find six specific spending items; the sites were graded on how easily the information could be found.

Only on South Carolina’s, Arkansas’ and Kentucky’s transparency sites were the focus groups able to easily find all six expenditures. The term “transparency” is used to refer to a number of issues related to giving citizens access to the inner workings of government – making sure meetings of public bodies are properly advertised to increase citizen-participation; responding to requests from the public for records and documents in a timely manner; publishing as much useful information as possible on the web; and making checkbooklevel spending details easily available to

the public.

I've focused my own efforts on online fiscal transparency. For one thing, it's the area of finance that falls under my purview as the state's accountant. And as a CPA, I can tell you there's no better remedy to the ageold problem of wasteful spending than publishing itemized spending for all to see. It's perhaps the most stringent form of open government.

When it comes to open government, South Carolina typically stacks up near the middle; we do better than many other states, but there are also many areas controlled by our General Assembly in which we must demand improvement – including the state's limited open-records laws, lobbyist disclosure reporting, and management of the state pension fund. So it's especially gratifying to receive high marks for online fiscal transparency, a cause to which my staff and I have assumed responsibility and devoted countless hours over the past decade.

Still, we're committed to continuously striving to find ways to make public spending details as convenient to access and as easy to understand as possible — and to provide a positive example for others to follow. And we ask for your help: visit cg.sc.gov, click on the "Fiscal Transparency" button near the top of the page, locate the contact link, and provide your feedback or suggestions to cgooffice@cg.sc.gov. And as always, I urge those of you who support fiscal transparency to contact your local officials. If they're already on board, give them a pat on the back. If not, hold their feet to the fire.

Our nation's founders viewed citizen-access to government information — including finances — as vital to preserving freedom and liberty. Consider the words of Thomas Jefferson, who in 1802 wrote, "We might hope to see the finances of the Union as clear and intelligible as a merchant's books, so that every member of Congress and every man of any mind in the Union should be able to comprehend them, to investigate abuses, and consequently to control them."

That was when ledgers were generated with pens and paper. In an era of digital communication and smart phones, there are fewer and fewer excuses not to give people ready access to details about public spending.

————— Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and the state's Comptroller.