



VIEWPOINT

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Elected leaders have a responsible to provide open and transparent government.

You know if a term shows up in presidential campaigns, which are so determined to eschew base-pleasing principle in favor of some mythical “center,” it has been drained of any substantive meaning whatever.

Transparency is commonly understood to mean that an entity freely discloses information about its funding, activities and conflicting interests. Since politicians are in the business of pleasing conflicting interest groups, transparency is the last thing they want, particularly during elections. You can't promise the world to one group if you've already promised it to another.

Despite this essential conflict, however, some of our politicians have made important strides in government transparency. Indeed, based in part upon the leadership of the two presidential contenders, Illinois Democrat Sen. Barack Obama and Arizona Republican John McCain, a transparency milestone was achieved with the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006. The law requires that federal contracts be made available for public viewing over the Internet. It is available now at USAspending.gov.

Moreover, as so often happens when the federal government acts, many states have followed suit. In Ohio, Rep. Tom Brinkman has sponsored a similar bill, H.B. 420, which has passed the House of Representatives. Unfortunately, the bill is currently bottled up in senate committee.

Other states have had substantially more success, requiring that contracts or even checkbook expenditures and disbursements be put online. The state of Alaska has a particularly nice site, http://fin.admin.state.ak.us/dof/checkbook_online/index.jsp. In West Virginia, the state auditor makes available the entire state employee payroll – by name.

Although “transparency” has the feel of a buzzword, the concept is more than a fad. Part of the impetus for transparency arises out of the “sunshine” laws that followed Watergate, including significant amendments to the Freedom of Information Act and continuing changes to state sunshine laws.

But there is even deeper history to the concept than this. That government should tell the public what it's up to is a bedrock principle engraved into the very Constitution: “A regular statement and account of the receipts and expenditures of all public money shall be published from time to time.” The Ohio

Just the facts: Good government depends upon good information

By Michael J. Maurer

In May, I was named the director of the Center for Transparent and Accountable Government at the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a Columbus-based free-market think tank.

I felt pretty good about it until one of the presidential candidates came to Columbus and said, “My administration will set a new standard for transparency and accountability.”

Constitution has a parallel clause.

I am reminded of an old attorney who once took me under his wing, serving as mentor to me and many others besides. He took me to dinner once, and I asked him the oh-so-bright question, “What’s the most important thing about practicing law?” His answer: “Get the facts.”

I thought that was stupid and unthoughtful. “Doesn’t everyone do that?” I said. I think he actually snorted.

Of course time has taught me he was right. Getting the facts at all is hard. Getting an adequate volume of them, and understanding what they mean, is harder still.

For now, my mission is to focus on getting the facts, or rather, making sure that the public can get the facts. The Center for Transparent and Accountable Government, and many other entities, will be working hard this year to promote easy, Internet-based access to public entity operating data of all kinds. You can see our work, and join it, at two parallel Web sites: the wiki Sunshinereview.org, a national effort, and our parallel wiki, OhioSunshine.org. Whatever your views, we hope you do join us. Better government will result.

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