

"Federation Corner" column
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County government releases financial transparency website

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Beginning on July 28 of this year, the Montgomery County government made its new Financial Transparency Website available for public use at <http://budget.data.montgomerycountymd.gov>.

The purpose of this effort is to make aggregate and detailed data about the County's operating and capital budgeted expenditures and funding sources more readily available to the public. The data can be viewed as numeric information as well as through a variety of graphs that illustrate the relative size of selected expenditures or funding.

It should be noted, however, that the Financial Transparency Website only contains budget data for the County agencies and does not have budget information for the independent agencies such as the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC). This represents about 47% (\$2.63 billion) of the county's total Approved Fiscal Year 2015 Operating Budget (\$5.56 billion).

The Financial Transparency Website allows users to select and drill down through information by various characteristics such as topic areas (for example, environment or public safety). Mouse clicking on a topic brings up the agencies included in that category. Clicking on an agency will reveal data by program title.

Because of the many ways that information can be selected and displayed, it requires a little time to learn the function of the various symbols and how elements on the screen can display additional information when the mouse is moved over them or when they are clicked on. Consequently, new users should expect to initially explore the website before finding specific answers to questions.

Fortunately the County's latest innovation can build on six years of experience by other governments from the Federal, state, and local levels. Since 2010, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) has produced reports on the relative progress among the 50 States in making their financial information online. For their latest report, go to: www.uspirg.org/reports/usp/following-money-2014

On the USPIRG website, users will find a comparison of the extensiveness of the data available and the features for identifying and analyzing this financial information. Maryland receives a "B minus" grade.

Generally following the release of these financial information government websites, some of the challenges that they face are discoveries of errors in the data entries, misclassification of some entries due to errors in identifying codes, or missing information resulting from incomplete records or data processing issues. This can be a benefit in that correcting these issues will result in more accurate analyses.

This release of the Montgomery County Financial Transparency Website is characterized as a first phase with additional expansions in the data coverage and data access features expected in the

future. It is a step forward in providing the public as well as government officials with more flexible ways to understand how public funds are being spent and where funding is coming from.

As these financial information websites mature, other governments have added other types of costs to the public, such as tax credits or subsidies and information on quasi-public agencies. Let us hope that as Montgomery County's Financial Transparency Website continues to mature, our local government officials will also expand the amount and the types of financial data that are provided to the citizens of the county on this website.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com