

Government Transparency: A Click or Two Away

Your state and local governments are hiding things from you. It's not a conspiracy. It's not incompetence. It's just inconvenient. Some things are inconvenient to tell you. Other things are inconvenient for you to know. Either way, you don't have access to a lot of information that the Montana Constitution guarantees but that present Montana laws and technology don't provide for. That lack of transparency means you can't see what's being done in your name or how your tax dollars are really being spent.

The problem isn't with our public servants and employees. The 30,000ⁱ or so folks on our payroll are almost all conscientious professionals who want a better Montana. The problem is that as our government has increased in size and complexity, it hasn't updated its rules or its technology to keep up with our right to know what's being done in our names. Why does that matter? The harder it is for us to keep up the more likely we are to shrug and say things are just too complex for us to do anything about. Some folks like that. But it's not how a participatory democracy should work. Informed citizens make informed decisions. Problem is, we simply can't stay informed under the current setup.

Montanans need to know what the people who work for us are doing. But anymore that's just about impossible. As budgets and agencies grow, the state's books and rules get more and more complex. It's one thing to see a budget. It's quite another to see how that budget was executed: who got contracts, what was bought, how many people got hired, and how much was spent on any of those things? Article II Section 9 of Montana's Constitution guarantees our right to know all that. But we don't have a practical means of exercising that right. Sure, you can spend hours and hours surfing web sites from agency to agency and maybe track down some pieces of the puzzle. But you're not likely to find information even as basic as what you have in your own checkbook.

Or you could make a written request to an agency or office asking for specific data. If you know where to ask, and if you ask for the right thing, and if they have a document that matches your request, you can even travel to their office during normal business hours to make a copy. So, assuming all those "ifs" come true the data you're looking for might be available. But is it accessible? Is that the best we can do in the Information Age? I can find and buy a shear bolt for a Sears Craftsman 30" snow blower in ten minutes and with a half dozen mouse clicks. Why can't I just as easily see how much was spent and who it went to for a snow plow the Department of Transportation just bought? It's not a question of inventing something new. It's a question of harnessing current technology in a way that makes our government more transparent and accessible. But that's only half the problem.

Our laws are also out of date. They were written in an era when Xerox copiers and the U.S. Postal Service were about the only means of transmitting data. But now we have email, web sites, search engines, and all sorts of other tools that allow us to transfer data easily and cheaply, and in formats where people can analyze it, examine trends, make pretty charts and graphs, and do host of other things that turn raw data into usable information. These are tools that anyone who has ever used Google or Yahoo takes for granted. Why aren't they available to let us see what's being done in our names and where our tax dollars are going?

Imagine tracking a dollar out of your wallet from the time it goes into government's coffers until it's spent: the revenue source, appropriation, agency, program, contract, recipient, and anything else that dollar touches. That's true transparency and openness that will let people engage with their government and hold it accountable. The technology is cheap and readily available. Other states have done it. The mandate is in our Constitution. What's missing is the political will to make it happen. Go to <http://BigSkySearch.info> to get more information about how to bring our state government into the 21st century. And tell your elected representatives that you want Montana's government to be as transparent to you as you are to it.

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The Montana Policy Institute (www.mtpolicy.org) is a nonpartisan policy research center based in Bozeman.

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¹ U.S. Census, State and Local Government Full-Time Equivalent Employment, by Selected Function and State: 2006.