

What Are They Afraid To Tell You?

The Governor, in his State of the State address, assured us that “[federal] dollars will be spent in an accountable and transparent way...” One would have hoped he meant state dollars as well. But he and a few Representatives on the House Taxation Committee are instead standing in the way of letting us see how our tax dollars are being spent and what’s being done in our names. We should all be wondering why.

First, let’s be clear. This isn’t a partisan issue. At the federal level, President Obama cosponsored legislation with John McCain that brought more transparency to contract spending. Groups as diverse as the Progressive States Network and Americans for Tax Reform have asked their memberships to support more transparency in government using virtually identical arguments and endorsing virtually identical solutions. Nearly two dozen states have taken bipartisan action to bring more transparency to their state spending. This is an issue of fairness and accountability. If you don’t know what and who government is spending your money on you can’t participate and hold your government accountable. We can’t effectively do that in Montana and we need to fix it now.

The Montana Policy Institute recently conducted a poll that found barely 16% of Montanans had ever submitted a public records request to find out where their tax dollars were going or what was being done in their names. That means one of two things: Either the vast majority of us are perfectly happy with how our government is running, who’s getting our tax dollars, how regulations are passed, and all that. Or we feel helpless in our ability to gather any useful information or to do anything with it. In other words Montanans are checking out as active participants in the democratic process. But which of these is it?

Another enlightening number answers that question. In the same poll, MPI asked whether respondents would use a government-run transparency web site to track revenues and spending if it was free and easy to use. Over 65% said yes. Those two results indicate an enormous hunger to find out where tax dollars are going coupled with an enormous frustration over the ability to find out. But what’s standing in their way?

Only one entity is on record as opposing current transparency efforts in the legislature: The Governor’s Office. His Budget Director called a bill (SB 460) to have a monitoring committee oversee state stimulus spending unnecessary. His office has testified multiple times against a bill (SB 241) that would have created a searchable transparency web site where Montanans could track dollars from the time they enter government coffers until they’re spent. What were their arguments? Mainly that you’re happy with the current system of mailing in requests for information, that such a site wouldn’t provide anything new, and that it costs too much. They also insultingly argued that most Montanans are too computer illiterate to use a searchable web site.

Those arguments are all easily refutable by the facts, and have been at www.BigSkySearch.info. Polls show that over 63% of Montanans would like to see such a site and 65% would use it if it was available. Other states and the federal government have created web sites for costs ranging from nothing, i.e.

using existing resources, to under a million dollars. I'd bet state government spends more on toner cartridges in a year than they'd spend on a transparency web site, but under the current system it'd take days, weeks, or months of firing off letters to the bureaucracy to verify that claim. We're talking pennies on the state budget dollar. What can be more important than giving citizens the tools they need to oversee their government? Public service ads telling us to buckle up? Lawn care? Traveling to conferences back East? How much of your tax money could be better spent telling you who gets your tax dollars and why than on pet projects and special interest handouts?

Why does the Governor oppose giving you easy access to your data? There's no way to know. We only know that he is, and have to presume that he's leaning on House Democrats to follow suit – even though diverse groups like the Montana Newspaper Association, Montana Taxpayer Association, Society of CPAs, National Federation of Independent Businesses, and others are on record as supporting it.

The Governor's office has stood alone trying to kill any chances for transparency and accountability for the 2009 session, despite his promising the opposite. And some of his Party in the House are following his lead instead of looking out for your interests. If that doesn't bother you then so be it. But if it does – and it should – then you ought to tell them so. And you have to do it fast.

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

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