

30 October, 2008

An Open Letter to Kansas Newspapers:

A movement that has the potential of transforming American politics is sweeping the country. That movement is an effort to empower taxpayers to become true fiscal watchdogs by creating searchable websites for government expenditures that allow them to track their tax dollars virtually at a mouse-click.

The effort began at the federal level, with Congress passing and the president signing the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006, which led to the creation of USAspending.gov, a website that tracks expenditures made under federal grants and contracts. However, much of the success of this movement at the state level is owed to the states that first picked up the ball and ran with it. One of these states is Kansas.

State Rep. Kasha Kelley realized the potential of emulating the idea of greater accountability through transparency and sponsored the “Taxpayer Transparency Act in 2007. Although the concept of transparency is so powerful in its simplicity – taxpayers fund government operations, so they should be able to track how their tax dollars are being spent – passage of the legislation was an uphill battle after the bill was double-referred in the state senate. But together with Taxpayer Protection Caucus Chair Tim Huelskamp, Rep. Kelley was able to pass the legislation, and Kansas became the first state to enact spending transparency legislation in the wake of the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act – ultimately with broad bipartisan support.

Passage of the Taxpayer Transparency Act led to the creation of “KansasKanView,” a web portal that allows Kansas taxpayers to track comprehensive information on their state’s finances in a user-friendly way, and is helping to eliminate the potential for fraud, waste and abuse.

Along with its peers in Missouri (the “Missouri Accountability Portal” created by Gov. Matt Blunt via executive order) and Texas (“Where the Money Goes,” a portal resulting from a collaborative effort of Gov. Rick Perry, Comptroller Susan Combs, and the legislature), Kansas KanView has served as a model for other states as they pursue their own efforts to bring more transparency into government finance.

Since 2007, twelve states have passed legislation to create similar searchable websites for government expenditures, and just like in Kansas, the effort met with broad bipartisan support. Several governors and state constitutional officers have pursued executive efforts to this effect, and in at least one state, New Jersey, spending transparency proponents adopted Kansas’s Taxpayer Transparency Act verbatim and are looking to pass the bill in the 2009 legislative session. Even at the local level, efforts to create similar websites, or at least post the locality’s check register online, have sprung up and are spreading fast.

About 200 years ago, Thomas Jefferson said: “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.” The advent and maturing of the Internet has made the implementation of this vision possible, and Kansas’s Taxpayer Transparency Act has helped to lay the foundation for a growing movement towards greater accountability in government finance at the state level.

Acknowledging the importance of transparency and accountability Americans for Tax Reform recently created the Center for Fiscal Accountability, a project line dedicated to promoting these principles at all levels of government. For more information, visit www.fiscalaccountability.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Norquist', written in a cursive style.

Grover Norquist
President
Americans for Tax Reform