



Hide-and-seek game played on taxpayers needs to end

By Jim Waters

How is it that I can find out at 4 a.m. from my bank's Web site how some of my money performs, yet I can't find during business hours how an even greater portion of my money — taxes extracted from my wallet by government — gets spent?

Maybe politicians realize that if Internet-savvy Kentuckians found out how most of their hard-earned money gets squandered by bureaucrats, they might react as if discovering someone used their ATM password to clean out their bank accounts. The only thing that would make that scenario worse: not knowing you got fleeced until the bounced checks and overdraft charges piled up to the point the cops came knocking on your door.

The same holds true with government spending. The only thing worse for taxpayers than knowing how Frankfort squanders their dollars on polar-bear exhibits and farmers' markets is for them not to know and thus be able to take corrective action.

Gov. Steve Beshear campaigned on the promise of making government more transparent and accountable. He even established a group to study the issue. A recent press release from the Finance and Administration Cabinet stated that the task force would offer "recommendations to the governor by Nov. 1 on the creation and implementation of a 'one-stop' online, public-information access tool."

So far, the task force has met only once, and Finance and Administration Cabinet spokeswoman Jill Midkiff said another meeting hasn't been scheduled. But she quickly added that the staff continues to work on the project.

Wonderful! But all this rope-a-doping hasn't resulted in one single additional ounce of more government transparency.

"This doesn't need to be studied anymore," said Rep. Jim DeCesare, who filed a government-transparency bill during the last legislative session. "There's no reason it can't happen now. Make it happen. It's easy to do, costs next to nothing and makes us look good."

In other words, there's no reason that good policy cannot also be good politics.

Besides, if putting the state's checkbook online is a good idea after this fall's election, why isn't it a good idea now? That way, taxpayers could see how their money gets spent and impart accountability via the voting booth.

With a cadre of support among fellow lawmakers, DeCesare's bill creating a Web site for taxpayers to track government spending would have passed. Instead, it went nowhere — the same direction the governor's group seems headed.

About half of all states now have Web sites through which the public can track government spending each day. Some, such as Georgia, accomplished this legislatively. Others, like South Carolina, achieved it through a governor's executive order.

If Trey Grayson, secretary of state, can issue an order resulting in an online searchable database of his office's spending — while properly addressing legitimate privacy concerns — why can't Beshear get the state's checkbook online, too?

The people have a right to know about payments, audits and inspections. Such information likely would lead to smaller, less costly, and who knows, maybe even better government, (which may be an oxymoron.)

If the governor didn't want to resort to issuing an executive order, he could have pulled his office's bully pulpit out of storage to support DeCesare's bill and make a passionate case for a government that truly is of, by and for the people.

True to his pattern of doggedly pushing for sound public policy, DeCesare told me he plans to file his bill again during the 2009 session.

Good luck, Jim.

You have a group of legislative bosses that relish backroom deals and secretive budget meetings with armed guards, and an administration that drags its feet while claiming to support open government.

Finding backing for a more transparent government in that environment will be like trying to convince Britney Spears to join a convent.

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