



Bluegrass Beacon BY JIM WATERS

A little ‘TRAIN’ that needs more lawmakers aboard

By Jim Waters

The transparency train is leaving the station.

At first, the train largely sat empty. Except for a few policymakers, most of Frankfort showed little interest in letting taxpayers know how lawmakers spent \$9 billion of *their money* at budgeting time.

“We know better than unsophisticated taxpayers,” describes the attitude of some of our state’s biggest spenders.

But state government’s shareholders know more than lawmakers think. The voice of these empowered Kentucky taxpayers already has resulted in significant improvements to Gov. Steve Beshear’s formerly useless government spending Web site at www.opendoor.ky.gov.

Previously, the site offered some — but not nearly enough — information about spending. Now, even though more attention to “user-friendliness” is still needed, the greatly improved site even offers “PDF” versions of contracts with vendors.

Beshear deserves some credit for getting on board the Transparency Express. But remember, the way it works now, the next governor could shut the line down for any number of lame reasons often put forth by the Government in Secret Sect: claims of site misuse, cost and security or privacy concerns.

The progress made toward giving Kentucky’s secretive government a “sunnier” disposition would come undone.

To keep that from happening, Kentucky needs a policy requiring all three branches of government to put their checkbooks online in a searchable database within a reasonable time frame.

[Two lawmakers](#) have “engineered” a bill to do that: Sen. Damon Thayer, R-Georgetown, and Rep. Jim DeCesare, R-Bowling Green.

DeCesare got things rolling with similar bills during the past two legislative sessions. The third time should be a charm.

“The transparency debate is an issue whose time has come,” Thayer told me. “Many states across the union are doing exactly the same thing. It’s something we should have done a long time ago.”

But taxpayers tend to not pay as close attention to spending when money flows through the state like the Kentucky River and “the livin’ is easy.” TEA (Taxed Enough Already) parties from Murray to Richmond didn’t occur when most Kentuckians found chickens in their pots and jobs to buy those birds.

But tough times changed that, and now taxpayers want to know how their hard-earned money gets tossed around. Yes, they want a “SEA” (Spending Enough Already) change in Frankfort and Washington, D.C.

State Auditor Crit Luallen's office has shown time and again that when taxpayer-backed spending becomes public, change for the better occurs. And that's why making government more transparent matters so much.

Just one example: An audit by Luallen's office could not even determine how much Kentucky spent on its CATS education testing system in 2008. Luallen's office reported that incomplete invoices involving [\\$14 million](#) for the CATS test "do not sufficiently describe services provided." These incomplete invoices resulted in thousands of dollars worth of overpayments and contract modifications.

In just one of those cases, the KDE overpaid thousands of dollars to testing vendor HumRRO "because the vendor's invoice was not adequately reviewed."

Who knows what additional shameful spending could be eliminated if Luallen had the eyes of many more taxpayers helping reconcile Frankfort's checkbook? As Kentucky native and former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said: "Sunlight is . . . the best of disinfectants."

The TRAIN (Transparency, Review And Insight Now) made possible through the bills proposed by DeCesare and Thayer can take taxpayers directly to the source of spending problems. Kentucky taxpayers would become "citizen auditors."

"We're going to get a bunch of free audits," DeCesare said.

All state lawmakers need to get on board this train.

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