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How to open N.C.'s books

From Becki Gray, a former legislative staffer who is vice president for outreach at the Raleigh-based John Locke Foundation:

There's a revolution underway in state government -- a movement toward more public participation, more information available more rapidly via the Internet, and more transparency in how taxpayers' money is budgeted and who actually gets the money. Unfortunately, North Carolina isn't participating yet.

Openness and budget transparency aren't minor issues. Everything government does, it does with taxpayer dollars. By failing to provide good and timely information about expenditures, our state government is not accountable.

Detail on state spending is found in a six-volume, tiny-spaced continuation budget coded and organized in such a way that it is useless to all but a handful of analysts. Local budgets for counties, school boards and cities may be even worse, with no continuity of content or organization.

Other states are working hard to make the people's business open, transparent and easily accessible. Missouri has developed a budget-tracking Web site that is updated daily. Each state agency can be accessed to see how it spends its money, including all purchases of goods and services, pay levels for every state employee, all tax credits issued, and lists of delinquent taxpayers. It's all in one place and easy to access and understand. Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Virginia, South Carolina and Texas have enacted legislation to establish public access Web sites. Illinois, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, New Mexico and Tennessee considered similar proposals in 2007.

The N.C. General Assembly has ignored calls to establish a state transparency Web site. And there's little incentive for county and city governments to make their dealings transparent.

North Carolina should follow the lead of many other states and require all government expenditures to be posted immediately on official Web sites so reporters and citizens can assess their value and look for patterns, such as personal relationships and political giving.

Consider just one example of why transparency is critically important for self-government. This May, voters in more than a fifth of North Carolina counties will be asked on their primary ballots to authorize new local taxes on retail sales or home sales. It appears that in many of these counties, taxpayers will be forced directly or indirectly to fund "educational" efforts, thinly veiled political campaigns aimed at convincing voters to approve the new taxes. For example, the Orange County board of commissioners has approved spending \$100,000 of county revenues on such a campaign in favor of a land-transfer tax.

More broadly, two organizations -- the N.C. League of Municipalities and the N.C. Association of County Commissioners -- have lobbied for such tax referenda for years and employ dozens of employees, including several registered lobbyists. Their primary sources of funding are "membership dues" paid for by taxpayers. Can taxpayers clearly see how these dollars are spent? No.

The John Locke Foundation is undertaking a major initiative to urge state and local officials to develop transparency Web sites. We'll do the first step ourselves -- by cataloging what's currently available from state agencies, counties, school districts and cities and then creating our own Web portal at www.JohnLocke.org so the public can access current information easily. Next, we'll urge North Carolina to create a comprehensive online reporting system like the one South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford is implementing now. Surely if South Carolina can do it, we can, too.