

Somerville legislators: Not accessible? Then it's not public

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Wicked Local Somerville

Posted Mar 24, 2010 @ 02:50 PM

Somerville — Members of Somerville's state delegation are among the long list of legislators supporting a bill that would make information about the state's budget and spending more easily accessible.

State reps. Carl Sciortino, D-Medford, and Denise Provost, D-Somerville, and state Sen. Pat Jehlen, D-Somerville, are supporting the Revenues and Expenditures Transparency Act, which would require the state to put the annual operating budget, as well as contracts, local aid, grants and other financial information, on a website. If passed, proponents said the website will allow taxpayers to track their money through the State House, as well as through quasi-public agencies and organizations that receive state funding or grants.

"There are a lot of public records that relate to how we spend our money that truly aren't public until they're in an accessible format," said Sciortino. "This bill gives the public tools to measure the effectiveness of how we spend our money."

While the state's budget makes it online, some of the finer details may not.

"Spending is usually pretty transparent. You can usually go on the state website and find spending, but you can't find all the contracts," said Jehlen.

Jehlen said there had been some concern that any organization that took state funds would have to submit their books for public viewing. But, Jehlen said, what legislators are really looking for is a record of what the money was used for or how many jobs were created.

"I think sometimes there's a concern, sometimes stated, sometimes not stated, that having too much data, too accessible, makes businesses shy," said Provost. "Sometimes it's hard to assess whether we're getting the economic development we think we're investing in."

Even legislators can run into problems trying to find the facts.

"To quote an expression that our mayor has often and successfully used, 'You can't manage what you can't measure.' It's so important, in order to do our jobs properly, to understand the real consequences of decisions and to do that we need access to data and we need to be able to access data easily," said Provost.

All three legislators pointed out that the bill doesn't propose something that other cities, towns and states aren't already doing and that more and more constituents are becoming accustomed to.

"As more and more people become increasingly accustomed to finding all kinds of information online, when there are holes in the fabric of information people want to know why," Provost said. "People get very frustrated when they have to go through very old-fashioned administrative procedures to find a document that is, by law, open source. The voice of the open-source folks is going to be one that increasingly demands this kind of accountability from government."

More public access to financial information could make it easier for members of the public to be involved in the budget process.

"I think it's really important in restoring trust in how we spend our money. The best way to prioritize is to know where the money is going now and how you'd like to change that," Sciortino said.

The bill recently got a favorable report from the House State Administration and Regulatory Oversight Committee, and Jehlen said there has been discussion in the Senate about adding the measure to the state's economic development package.

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