



Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook: Increasing Transparency and Accountability for Taxpayers in the Commonwealth

As Pennsylvania's State Treasurer, Joe Torsella will leverage technology and citizen engagement to expand and enrich access to state government information, ensuring that Pennsylvanians know exactly how their tax dollars are being spent. Making information that is already a matter of public record accessible, searchable and navigable, Joe's Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook initiative will provide citizens and government officials alike with a powerful new tool to scrutinize and reform the Commonwealth's financial practices.

Modeled on the successful and award-winning Open Checkbook site developed by Ohio's Treasurer, Joe's plan will move Pennsylvania from the lowest tier of transparency into a higher rank of states nationwide providing access to financial information. It will make monitoring state spending as intuitive as consulting a bank statement. Just as many Pennsylvanians go online and use monthly bank and credit card statements to review their own expenditures, make adjustments to their budgets, detect irregularities and prevent fraud, Sunshine Checkbook will facilitate a new era of real-time transparency in state spending.

In an age of Big Data, Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook will be a powerful tool for better government. It will incorporate 21st century analytics, fostering data-driven decision making and innovation by government officials and putting actionable information in the hands of the people to prevent waste and to drive reform.

Joe Torsella on Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook:

“Every dollar in the Treasury comes from the hard work of Pennsylvania taxpayers, and any dollar wasted is a wasted opportunity to build a stronger Commonwealth. By building an open checkbook database, we make sure every dollar we spend is transparent and accountable to every Pennsylvanian.”

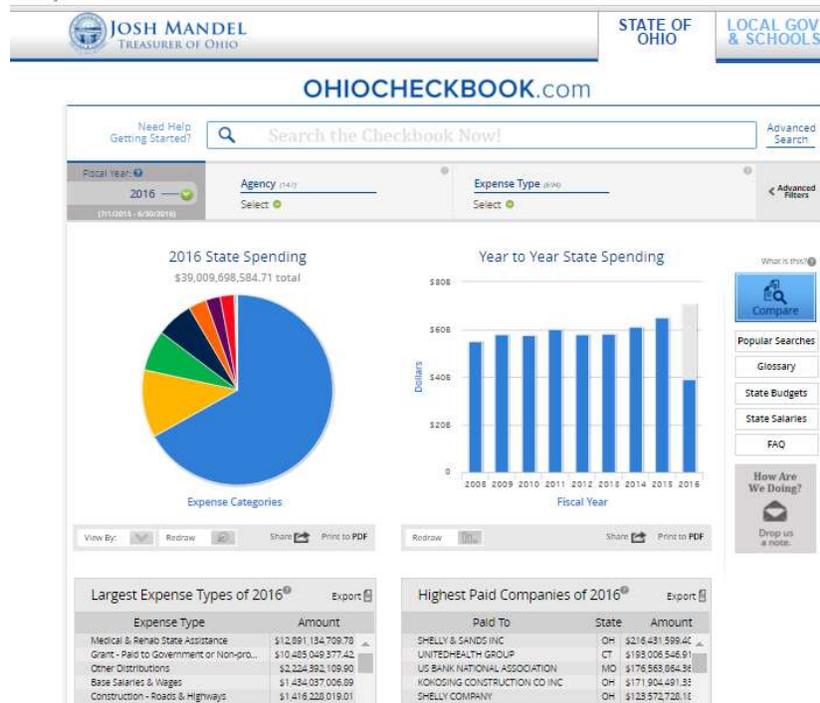


Figure 1. Home page for Ohio Open Checkbook. Keeps track of the largest expenditure and the largest paid companies in the current year.

A Blizzard of Information Hiding in Plain Sight

A government that is open and accountable to its citizens is the ultimate bipartisan issue. That’s certainly true in Pennsylvania, where we currently have two ways to access public-spending data -- one launched in 2008 by Gov. Rendell and one in 2011 by Gov. Corbett.

On February 14, 2008, Governor Edward Rendell signed Act 3 of 2008, updating the Right-to-Know Law. Chapter 17 of the law requires Pennsylvania agencies to file with the Treasury all contracts valued at \$5,000 or more, as well as summary information about each contract within 10 days of its execution. It also requires Treasury to post this information on a publicly accessible website, named the Contracts e-Library, which is now accessible through a link on patreasury.gov.¹

In 2011, Governor Tom Corbett signed into law the Pennsylvania Web Accountability and Transparency Act, known as the PennWATCH Act. The law required the Governor’s Office of Administration to create the PennWATCH website, which provides a wide array of Commonwealth spending information, including granular information regarding employees’ salaries, budget appropriations, and spending, including the contracts contained in the Treasurer’s Contracts e-Library.² Visitors viewed the checkbook data on the site a mere 4,418 times.³ Visitors were on these pages for an average of less than four minutes. As with the

¹ Contracts e-Library is searchable by keyword, contracting party, contract amount, contract number, date range, and subject matter. Although each contract and accompanying information can be viewed and downloaded individually, they cannot be aggregated or analyzed with any level of modern sophistication. For example, a viewer is unable to view duplicative contracts or view possible patterns.

² The website contains a searchable database, similar to that of the Contracts e-Library. A statutorily mandated Annual Report shows that in 2014, 171,866 unique visits yielded 316,704 unique page views, with more than half viewing employee salary information.

³ Office of Administration’s PennWatch 2014 Annual Report. Available at: <http://www.pennwatch.pa.gov/Documents/PennWATCH%20Annual%20Report%202014.pdf> Accessed on March 31, 2016.

Contracts e-Library, this information is not downloadable for a user to sort, research, or manipulate across all departments or branches of government.⁴

There is obvious will from both sides of the aisle to open the Commonwealth's checkbook, but there is an important challenge. Though Pennsylvania has made efforts to disclose more information to the public, there remains no statutory mandate to publish data or respond to Freedom of Information requests in an open format. Far from being a repository and proactive catalyst for Commonwealth government transparency, the Office of Open Records was created to enforce the Right-to-Know Law and to hear appeals from parties whose requests for government information have been denied. Its mission, therefore, lies within that law's narrow bounds, and it leads no Administration-wide push to expand transparency beyond the requirements of the law. This comes at a considerable cost to the Commonwealth in both the public and private sectors. We miss opportunities to make government work more efficiently and provide information on which business decisions can be made.

In its report *Following the Money 2015: How the 50 States Rate in Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data*, the United States Public Interest Research Group assigned Pennsylvania a score of 83 out of 100, earning it a B rating and placing it only in the middle ranks of the states.⁵ For the sake of its citizens and its economy, Pennsylvania should instead lead the pack in terms of government transparency, and to make that happen we have work to do.

Joe Torsella's Plan for a 21st Century Checkbook for Pennsylvania

As State Treasurer, Joe will place Pennsylvania in the forefront of providing access to information about government spending and drive reform by implementing the following five-point plan.

1. Open the Data

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should open its data. Joe will take all publicly available information the information at Treasury and release it according to internationally recognized open data principles.-Government innovators and application developers will be able to use the data to support their efforts or platforms, allowing the data to be synthesized and analyzed beyond the parameters of the existing archaic sites. The open release of this data will supplement, not supplant, the current features of the Treasury's Contracts e-Library. With Treasury as an example, other Commonwealth agencies and public institutions should follow suit.

2. Open the Process

With a new standard set for data transparency in Pennsylvania, Treasury will call on the public to help realize the data's operational potential.-This process starts by soliciting comments from the public. Pursuant to the Right-to-Know Law, the Treasury will proactively release in open format as much data as possible, then ask the public what other categories of information could help drive their progress their success. Armed with the information they need, programmers, web developers, and engaged citizens will be called upon to participate in the first-ever Treasury hackathon. Partnering with the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association and PennApps, both of

⁴ Office of Administration's PennWatch 2014 Annual Report. Available at: <http://www.pennwatch.pa.gov/Documents/PennWATCH%20Annual%20Report%202014.pdf> Accessed on March 31, 2016.

⁵ *Following the Money 2015: How the 50 States Rate in Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data*

which have hosted similar successful events in recent years, Treasury will bring together these individuals to ask probing questions of the data, test hypotheses, synthesize various data sets, and develop applications and interfaces to maximize their public use. Pennsylvania’s segment of the tech community knows best practices from other regions, the best questions to ask and how to answer them, and the best ways to most engage the broader public in their work and the work of government.

3. Integrate More Data

To make the data Treasury releases more complete, more data sets will be released. The US Public Interest Research Group in its 2015 report identified missing checkbook-level and projected public benefit data for five data sets in the Commonwealth:

- Film Tax Credit
- Job Creation Tax Credit
- Keystone Innovation Zone Tax Credits
- Keystone Opportunity Zone Program
- Pennsylvania First Grant

The posting of these data sets both in open format and to the applicable current web tools will ensure full compliance with the spirit of the laws. Along with posting all of the checkbook spending data in an open, downloadable format, these measures will bring Pennsylvania’s grade up to full compliance in the 2016 USPIRG report.

At the same time, the true value of this data, once in open format, is its interaction with other data sets. Currently, we can use the data to answer the question: “What good was purchased from which vendor on which date?” With access to more data, we can ask: “How was the good used? How successful was its use? How do these data points compare with previous procurements? To other agencies’ comparable procurements? Are there opportunities to achieve economies of scale or other efficiencies? Did the vendor or its representatives lobby agencies or elected officials to procure their goods? Did they contribute to the campaigns of elected officials who influenced the procurement?” Juxtaposing checkbook-level spending data alongside other data answers these questions—and more.

For instance, the Pennsylvania Department of State provides a searchable database of campaign finance reports dating back to 2000.⁶ It also includes general filer information, contributions from individuals, and contributions from political committees, as well as other receipts, expenditures and debts. Users can search the database by entering information about the election year, contest, district, or party—or a combination of these elements. They can also enter a candidate or committee’s name into the search bar. Importantly, however, a website visitor can

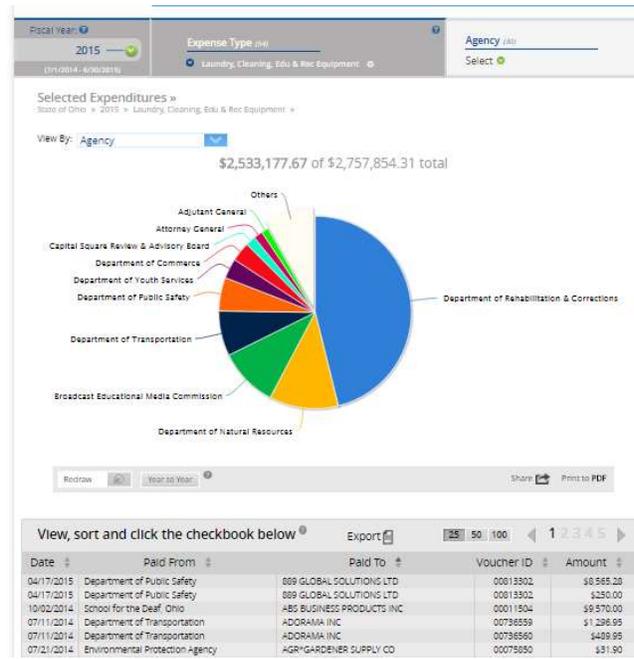


Figure 2. This is every Ohio State Agency's spending on cleaning in 2015. A user can download the data including the contractor, amount and voucher identification number. They can also see which agency spends the most on outside cleaning and laundry.

⁶ Campaign Finance Online Reporting, Available at: <https://www.campaignfinanceonline.state.pa.us/pages/CFReportSearch.aspx>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

also leave the search function and download in bulk entire years of data for their own use, manipulation, and integration into other sets of data. The Cities of Philadelphia⁷ and Pittsburgh⁸ also share data in open format, and the federal government hosts more than 800 data sets on Pennsylvania items — everything from data on the programs and services offered by the US Department of Veterans Affairs, to highway performance monitoring, to temperature observations of boreholes in the Commonwealth.⁹ As more data sets are shared with the public, particularly those pertaining to Pennsylvania, the more valuable each individual data set becomes. As State Treasurer, Joe will lead this effort by example, working with his colleagues in government across Pennsylvania to share their data in a way that maximizes utility and transparency.

4. Improve the Interface

Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook website will be user-friendly and navigable by ordinary citizens, irrespective of computer literacy. We will look to the success of other states in ensuring our own. For instance, Ohio's release of an updated website in 2014 with a best-practices interface yielded more than 100,000 visits in the first few months following its launch. To create such an interface for Pennsylvania would likely require a legislative appropriation. Ohio's top-rated website, launched in 2014, cost about \$814,000 to build.¹⁰

The Pennsylvania Treasury's Checkbook database should be easy to use. USPIRG hailed the search function of Ohio's Open Checkbook for this very reason: "Ohio's site populates instant search suggestions based on the letters typed into the search bar, creating a website that looks and behaves much like the top search engines Ohioans most commonly visit and interact with elsewhere on the internet. This feature aids transparency by helping users track down information without needing prior knowledge of exact search terms. In addition, every web page has the phone number and email address for a point of contact in state government." Google-like contextual and intuitive searches, along with human points of contact responsible for each element of data on the site, enable laymen to navigate the information with ease, and also help users find information they may not have been looking for intentionally. For those who still have trouble, "Help" buttons aid site navigation and technical questions. Finally, to start discussions with the broader public on social media, "Share" buttons enable users to post the information on other platforms.

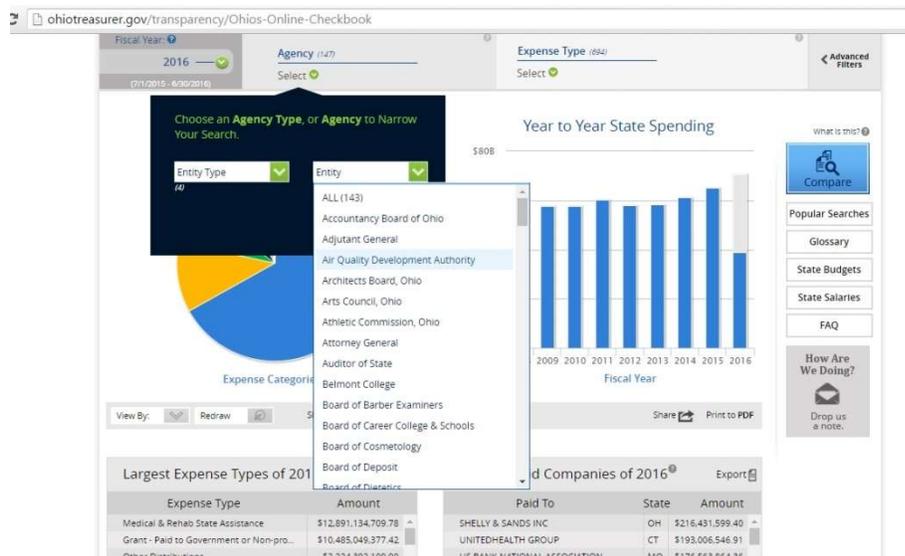
Treasury's website must be brought up to today's cutting edge. By using open source code, feedback and best practices from the technology community, the Treasury's website interface will be among the best government websites in the country and competitive with those of the private sector.

⁷ OpenDataPhilly. www.opendataphilly.org Accessed March 21, 2016.

⁸ Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center's City of Pittsburgh. <https://data.wprdc.org/organization/city-of-pittsburgh>. Accessed March 21, 2016.

⁹ Home of the U.S. Government's Open Data. Available at www.data.gov.

¹⁰ Jackie Borchardt, *Northeast Ohio Media Group* "Online checkbook allows taxpayers to track state spending". December 2, 2014. Available at http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2014/12/online_checkbook_allows_taxpay.html



5. Keep it Current

Pennsylvanians want real-time information about spending so they can hold their leaders accountable in real-time as well. In keeping with the default approach of disclosing information unless legally prohibited from doing so, the office will employ technology to facilitate the release and regular updating of data sets. It will also release such updates more frequently.

An application programming interface (or API) is a set of programming rules that enable one program's interface to communicate with another.¹¹ They are prevalent on the internet: When you input credit card information to purchase an item on Amazon.com, the Amazon interface interacts with the credit card company's interface to complete the purchase. It does so through an API. Similarly, with a new Sunshine Checkbook database, the use of an API would mean that when checkbook data is uploaded and updated, all users of that data — for instance, all apps that were created using the data — would be updated in real-time.

All of the recommendations outlined above are a product of their time. To prevent Pennsylvania's new Sunshine Checkbook from becoming as antiquated as its current one, we must commit to keeping pace with technological change. The foundation of open government is naturally suited to adapting with the times, but some elements described above require action on the part of the Department of Treasury to maximize the Sunshine Checkbook's dynamic potential: Hold the hackathon regularly—biennially at least. Regularly and formally solicit feedback from civic advocates, developers, and the public at large. To the extent possible, utilize open source coding and APIs, which often obviate the need for costly technology contracts and time-consuming programming updates.

In all these ways, Joe's Pennsylvania Sunshine Checkbook initiative enhances transparency and accountability in government operations. It empowers taxpayers, and it opens a conversation we must have about improving efficiency and shaping policies that make government work better for all Pennsylvanians.

¹¹ Lesson - API Strategy 101: What is an API. Available at <http://www.apiacademy.co/resources/api-strategy-lesson-101-what-is-an-api/>