



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

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CHILLICOTHE - Those interested in getting a look inside the checkbooks of the City of Chillicothe and Ross County government can now do so online.

Jamie Barker, with Ohio Treasurer Josh Mandel's office, was in Chillicothe Friday morning to officially announce that the City of Chillicothe and Ross County have become the latest local entities to put their financial transactions online through the OhioCheckbook.com initiative launched by the state treasurer about two years ago. In Ross County, the two entities join the Huntington Local Schools, Village of Adelphi and Paxton, Concord, Deerfield, Jefferson and Huntington townships in having officially launched their online checkbooks.

The initiative was designed to raise the state's ranking for government transparency by allowing residents to explore basic information from government financial transactions without having to go through the process of filing a public records request. Entities are not required to participate in the program, but those that choose to take part inform the treasurer's office and provide a spreadsheet with the necessary transaction data so that California-based technology firm OpenGov can work it into website form. A call is conducted to review the information and process and the entity is given all the time it needs to review the site and the data before giving the thumbs up for it to go live on the internet.

In the case of Chillicothe and Ross County, transactions presently can be found from all of 2016 and up to the most recently posted month in 2017. Both County Auditor Tom Spetnagel Jr. and City Auditor Kristal Spetnagel said the data for the site will be updated monthly.

Once on the site, visitors can do a search for the entity they wish to look at — all state pension funds have recently been added to the site as well as participating local governments, school districts and others. Once they are there, they can search transactions by department and look through individual payments. One of the more popular features as the site has developed, Barker said, is the ability to click on a specific transaction and see a representation of a check for that transaction appear on the screen, showing the amount, the payee, the date and what fund the money is coming from.

Anyone with questions about a particular payment can click on a button that says "Questions about this payment" near the bottom and an email will be sent automatically to someone who will be able to check into the question and provide an answer.

"A main point of this website is to be easy to use for a casual internet user," Barker said.

Because the City of Chillicothe already had a relationship with OpenGov, the front page of its OhioCheckbook.com site looks a bit different than most. Visitors will have to go to the left of the screen and click on the "Checkbook" link to be taken to the proper location.

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Both Spetnagels praised the site and its benefits, but joined County Commissioner Steve Neal in noting that it, alone, does not tell the entire story of city or county finances — it doesn't, for instance, deal with revenue. It also will not provide more specific information regarding the reason for the transaction.

"I used to be an auditor and I used to get public records requests and I would sit down with folks and say here's how this works," Neal said. "There's a lot of background information to get the entire story, so I encourage people that if they see something and have questions, contact the auditor or our office (in the case of the county) for further explanation."

Acknowledging the site is simply a tool to encourage transparency, Barker said the addition of the "Questions about this payment" button will help those looking for more detail to get to the right person and give officials responding to requests the detail needed to find the information more quickly.

Of the roughly 4,000 potential entities that were invited to open up their books through OhioCheckbook.com, about a quarter have partnerships with the treasurer's office with others working toward getting online. The state's checkbook is also online, and since its unveiling has seen about 700,000 visits thus far.

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