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Transparency - the Salvation of the State

Nebraska taxpayers received troubling news last month from the Sunshine Review, a non-profit that promotes government transparency: the Cornhusker state ranks dead last in information available on government websites.[\[1\]](#)

The study examined and scored websites at the state, county, city, and school district level, taking the combined scores as the state's overall grade. Websites were evaluated on ten factors, which varied for each level of government. Each category was reviewed for basic information including budgets for the last three years, contact information for elected and administrative officials public, details of government contracts, bids, and audits, and information about tax rates and total revenues for that particular level of government.[\[2\]](#)

Overall, Nebraska received a C, meeting only 50.44 percent of the study's criteria, the lowest of any state. When these grades are broken down, the state government website received a C-, meeting exactly 50 percent of the criteria; tying with New Mexico and Kentucky for the lowest state score. County governments on the whole received a solid C, meeting 58 percent of the criteria. City governments received the highest of the four Nebraska grades, earning a C+ by meeting 62 percent of the criteria, while school districts performed the worst with a D by meeting only 39 percent of the criteria.[\[3\]](#) Kristin McMurray, the author of the study, stated that the first improvements Nebraska could make would be to put more contact information for government officials online, improve access to public records information, post more budgets, contracts, audits, and ethics investigation information, as well as improve general usability.[\[4\]](#)

Four legislative bills have been introduced in this year's legislative session to improve transparency:

LB371, introduced by Omaha Sen. Heath Mello, would mandate each state agency to post the total number and value of each contract and subcontract awarded by the agency. Additionally, the agency would publicly list whether the contracted business was native to Nebraska or not, the dollar value of materials and services performed within Nebraska and outside the United States, if any waivers of preference were provided, and the total procurement value of materials manufactured outside the United States.[\[5\]](#)

While requirements to itemize each cost by whether its manufacture was foreign or domestic seems a bit excessive, the main thrust of the bill would provide some much

needed transparency in a process that pays out millions of dollars in taxpayer money each year.

LB429, introduced by Bellevue Sen. Sue Crawford, would require the Nebraska State Treasurer's website to provide a link to the Department of Administrative Services, who would be mandated to publish "a copy of each contract or subcontract that is a basis for an expenditure of state funds."^[6] These contract copies would include any documents referenced in the contract or subcontract, and be provided by all state agencies, boards, commissions, and departments. The website would allow the user to search by vendor, dollar amount, or government entity.^[7] As with LB371, this would provide some much needed citizen oversight on an often obscure process.

The final transparency bills are LB470 and LB274, introduced by Norfolk Sen. Jim Scheer and Omaha Sen. Jeremy Nordquist, respectively. LB470 would require school districts, when they approve or amend a superintendent's contract, to post all costs that "are reasonably anticipated to be incurred as a result" of the contract.^[8] Basically, salary, benefits, travel expenses, or any other costs that could be foreseen when entering or changing a contract with a proposed superintendent for a school district would have to be made available to the public. LB274 would also have the full compensation of superintendents and Educational Service Unit (ESU) administrators posted on the district or ESU's website. However, unlike LB470, LB274 would take a wider view and not only post contractual compensation, but also benefits "in policy, or through action taken by the board."^[9] Either of these bills would prevent a repeat of the surprise the Omaha Public Schools Board had when they made a retirement payout of over \$1 million to former Superintendent John Mackiel, last year.^[10] Such changes will not only benefit parents, students, and taxpayers, but also force school districts to be more accountable, and possibly help them contain administrative costs.

The inscription over the entrance to our Capitol reads "The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness of the Citizen," a motto that should be remembered when debating these bills. Transparency, in the form of online tools, will allow the people to be more watchful of their government.

^[1] Matt Kelley, "On government transparency report, Nebraska ranks 50th," *Nebraska Radio Network*, January 30, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://nebraskaradionetwork.com/2013/01/30/on-government-transparency-report-nebraska-ranks-last/>.

^[2] Kristin McMurray, "2013 Transparency Report Card," *Sunshine Review*, January 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, http://sunshinereview.org/images/0/06/2013_Transparency_Report_Card.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Matt Kelley, "On government transparency report, Nebraska ranks 50th," *Nebraska Radio Network*, January 30, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://nebraskaradionetwork.com/2013/01/30/on-government-transparency-report-nebraska-ranks-last/>.

[5] Nebraska Legislature, "Legislative Bill 371," January 18, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/Current/PDF/Intro/LB371.pdf>.

[6] Nebraska Legislature, "Legislative Bill 429," January 22, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/Current/PDF/Intro/LB429.pdf>.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Nebraska Legislature, "Legislative Bill 470," January 22, 2013. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/Current/PDF/Intro/LB470.pdf>.

[9] Nebraska Legislature, LB274: Introducer's Statement of Intent," February 4, 2013. Accessed February 21, 2013, <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/FloorDocs/Current/PDF/SI/LB274.pdf>.

[10] Adrian Whitsett, "Retired Omaha superintendent gets million-dollar payout," *KETV* September 18, 2012. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.ketv.com/news/local-news/Retired-Omaha-superintendent-gets-million-dollar-payout/-/9674510/16642172/-/rdmgoe/-/index.html>; Adrian Whitsett, "State senator to push for education reform," *KETV* September 20, 2012. Accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.ketv.com/news/local-news/State-senator-to-push-for-education-reform/-/9674510/16685646/-/2h4rd8z/-/index.html>.

