

Where the Money Goes:
Texas Comptroller's of Public Accounts (CPA)
Interactive Online State Expenditures Database

National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)

Category:
Digital Government: Government to Citizen

Texas

B. Executive Summary

To set new standards for transparency and accountability in Texas state government, the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (CPA) has taken proactive steps to provide an open window on state spending. Launched on October 1, 2007, CPA's "Where the Money Goes" Web site at <http://www.window.state.tx.us/wherethemoneygoes> gives the public 24/7 online access to dynamic and up-to-the-minute information on state agency expenditures. Taxpayers can track individual agency spending, examine purchases by type (even down to the pens and pencils) and identify the recipients of state funds. The taxpayers can also generate custom reports, view extensive data sets and download their results to their personal computers. Never before has this level of information been readily available to Texas taxpayers.

Some of the benefits of the "Where the Money Goes" initiative include:

- Tracking of state expenditures as part of the state's ongoing effort to set new standards for transparency and accountability.
- Allowing access to non-confidential state expenditures so citizens can learn how their tax dollars are being put to work for Texas.
- Allowing businesses to see the types of goods and services Texas state government entities are buying, thus allowing them to discover new business opportunities.
- Analyzing state government buying patterns to identify new opportunities to leverage the state's purchasing power.
- Reducing the need for of open records requests by making the most often-requested expenditure information available online.
- Providing a cost-effective (free) service to the citizens of our state and others interested in Texas finances.

"Where the Money Goes" advanced innovative ways to look at how the state spends taxpayer money. In doing so, it engaged our citizens about state financing and to be more active participants in their government. This has fostered open and transparent government by supporting public policy goals of Texas state leaders and making data available that was previously time-consuming for taxpayers to request and inefficient for CPA to produce on an ad-hoc basis.

C. Project Description

Taxpayers often see government spending as impenetrable. Texas Comptroller Susan Combs believes taxpayers have the right to know how their money is being spent, and it is only with transparency that government can be held truly accountable. As a result, Texas is now on the cutting edge of transparency, with an interactive, online database of state expenditures. Citizens can examine comprehensive state expenditures in one place and in many ways, without the needing to contact multiple agencies.

Starting Simple – January 2007

The first step for CPA was simple and began with posting the agency's own detailed expenditures online for the public to access. Under the direction of Comptroller Susan Combs during her first week in office, CPA posted the information along with a high-profile link to the data on the agency's Web site, which receives an average of more than 15 million hits a month.

Opening the Window Wider – April 2007

At the Comptroller's request, 24 of the state's largest agencies provided their detailed expenditures to CPA for posting on the Web. The data was presented in simple table format to share with the public. These agencies account for close to 80 percent of state expenses.

Maximizing Existing Resources – June 2007

To further help open the window on state spending, the CPA created a new Web presence for "Where the Money Goes" with a glossary of state spending terms, additional information about state finances and a list of ways state and federal government agencies were working to save taxpayer dollars. A key component of the new site was a simple drill-down Web application that allowed users to view state spending for all individual state agencies under broad spending categories for multiple fiscal years. The application was an existing, in-house tool, originally developed for fiscal management purposes. By adopting this tool for public use, CPA was able to use this existing tool to give Texans a new window into state spending.

Fully Tapping the Power of Technology – October 2007

The 2007 Texas Legislature responded to and reinforced the actions of CPA by enacting House Bill 3430, which called on the CPA to create an online state expenditure database – a virtual check register – for the public by Oct. 1, 2007. The system includes historical expenditure data from fiscal 2001–2007 at a summary level and detail level from data from fiscal 2008 forward.

CPA selected a vendor to implement of this legislation; however, the initiative was defined, managed and controlled by the Enterprise Project Management Office (EPMO) following the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) Project Delivery Framework for planning and executing the project. The EPMO was responsible for oversight as well as the outcome of the project.

The Business Intelligence (BI) solution is structured to allow the user to drill down to more detailed information based on their specific needs. The solution uses standard off-the-shelf software and hardware components. This minimizes maintenance, reduces the learning curve for users and administrators and also increases the stability of the solution. The three major components are database (MS SQL Server Standard 2005 implementation), ETL (Business Objects Data Integration) and Business Intelligence (Business Objects modeling). Each component has a dedicated server assigned for development, testing/quality assurance, and production environments. The servers are connected to the SAN storage disks (EMC CX300) via Brocade 200E switches.

The CPA leveraged the procurement of hardware and Business Objects software for the new business intelligence solution already underway to streamline other business processes at the agency. CPA did consider implementing this project using existing technology but determined the following:

- existing systems would require significant customization;
- negative impacts on mainframe and Web site performance were possible;
- functionality and features available to stakeholders would be limited;
- reusability and sharing across agencies would be minimal; and
- using older technology would limit the growth of the application.

CPA added the online expenditures database as a deliverable to the larger business intelligence project. By leveraging a larger technology project, the cost for the detailed online expenditures database totaled \$310,000 for developing the data warehouse and the reporting tools. The new database was unveiled online on Oct. 1, 2007, providing a new view to more than \$99.5 billion in annual state spending.

Looking to the Future – October 2007 to the present

The CPA will continue to enhance the tools and information available on the “Where the Money Goes” Web site based on direct user feedback. A short survey has been added to the site to gather information and suggestions for future enhancements. The search tips, glossary and “Ways to Use Where the Money Goes” educate users on how to use the tool. To spread the word about the site and to promote awareness and adoption, the site is linked from all other Texas state agency Web sites as mandated by House Bill 3430. By answering questions from interested parties, CPA is also working to support other transparency efforts at the state and national level.

Leverage and Transferability

Media commentators and watchdog groups have praised CPA’s “Where the Money Goes” initiative. While data and systems employed would have to be adapted to each organization’s data environment and legislative requirements, functions similar to “Where the Money Goes” could be adopted by any governmental body wishing to know how public funds are being spent. Information available through this initiative can be used by employees, taxpayers and policymakers to pinpoint streamline spending and discover ways in which agencies can save money.

Approximately 10 other states have contacted CPA to obtain information that would help them establish similar transparency legislation and programs. At the federal level, U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, a leading open government advocate and Budget Committee member, introduced the Federal Spending and Taxpayer Accessibility Act of 2008 on April 14, 2008, in an effort to “shed more light on government spending by creating an online earmark tracking system, providing taxpayer record statements and enhancing agency expenditure transparency.” (source: “Cornyn Introduces Bill To Boost Taxpayer Access To Federal Spending Records And Earmark Information”, <http://cornyn.senate.gov>). Sen. Cornyn’s bill is based in part on efforts at CPA, in particular the “Where the Money Goes” initiative.

D. Significance: How did the project improve the operation of government?

Comptroller Susan Combs said “We launched our transparency initiative in Texas because taxpayers deserve to see how and where their money gets spent. When we demystify finances, it heightens citizens’ confidence in government.”

“Where the Money Goes” is an innovative solution for one-stop access to the agency’s data, regardless of platform or software. By extracting the needed information to a common data warehouse where the records can be mined and analyzed, the results can be presented in a way that offers the most value to the users. The solution:

- eliminates redundant reporting tools and data warehouse tools at CPA;
- standardizes both tools and resources on a single platform;
- provides access to meaningful information across the spectrum of various and disparate agency systems and platforms; and
- offers user-friendly access and allows valuable CPA data to be used by a wider audience.

“Where the Money Goes” offers a number of ways that citizens, businesses, decision makers and other state agencies can research their data.

Citizens can find information on how their tax dollars are being put to work for Texas. For the highest level of detail, they can go to the Purchasing Code Search, which includes small-dollar purchases by the state’s largest state agencies – down to the pencils. Taxpayers can also use the Agency Search for a broad view of what Texas state government entities are spending.

Businesses can see the types of goods and services Texas state government entities are buying to discover new business opportunities. State vendors can also use the Vendor Search to see when payment transactions were processed.

Decision makers and state agencies can study state government buying patterns to identify new opportunities to leverage the state’s purchasing power. They can see what other state government entities are buying and from whom. They can perform a search by spending category for a big-picture view, or dig deeper for the larger state agencies in the purchasing code search.

This effort aligns with DIR statewide goals by:

- reducing government costs;
- driving effective technology contracting;
- leveraging the state’s investment in shared technology infrastructure;
- protecting and securing technology assets and information while safeguarding citizen privacy;
- simplifying citizen, government and business access to public-sector services and information; and
- promoting innovative use of technology that positively impacts the state’s business, as well as its economic development.

This effort has also assisted CPA in avoiding costs by allowing the public and other state agencies to run their own queries. No longer is an open records request required to get the data that is now available with a few clicks of a mouse. Additionally, vendors can run their own queries to determine if payments were processed, which saves valuable time for CPA Fiscal Management staff.

E. Benefit of the Project

With an average of 53,000 queries run each month, “Where the Money Goes” offers expenditure data that is useful for a wide audience. Approximately 70 percent of the users identify themselves as citizens while the other 30 percent is split equally (10 percent each) between local/state government officials, state employees and media.

Citizens can investigate how their tax dollars are being spent. Businesses can discover new business opportunities or check if a payment has been made. Decision makers and state agencies can analyze state government buying patterns to identify areas for potential cost savings.

Additional, non-financial returns on investment include:

- Advancing public policy goals – “Where the Money Goes” was a big step in making Texas state government more transparent.
- Improving system availability and 24/7 access to the data – Users can research at their convenience rather than being restricted to business hours or having to wait days for their reports.
- Reducing errors or duplicative efforts – By pulling data from the source systems, CPA promotes a shared technology infrastructure and avoids rework while reducing errors and eliminating duplicate efforts.
- Providing a cost-effective (free) service to the citizens of Texas.

CPA saw a decrease of 2.5 percent in open records requests related to expenditures compared to a year earlier. However, the real value of the system is in garnering public good will. Being transparent and open about where our tax dollars are spent helps restore public trust in government. The old adage says that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. CPA is honored that so many other states and Sen. Cornyn are looking to Texas’ “Where the Money Goes” site as the example of government transparency.