California State Treasurer's Office

Project Title:	DebtWatch Application
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Executive Summary

For years, Californians have felt disconnected from their government due to the lack of transparency. To remediate this, the California State Treasurer's Office (STO) created the "DebtWatch" (http://debtwatch.treasurer.ca.gov) web application to promote such transparency and make it easier for taxpayers to track $1.5 trillion in bonds, notes and other public debt issued over the past 30 years by more than 6,000 state and local governmental entities.

The STO's breakthrough open data DebtWatch site brings transparency and accountability to all levels of government. The site provides public access to all debt-related data submitted by the state, cities, counties, special districts, public education entities and other local governments. The availability of this information assists citizens, policymakers, the press, finance officials, and industry professionals in accessing, exploring, visualizing, and disseminating key public debt data in a meaningful way.

The DebtWatch open data delivery platform is hosted by Socrata. A separate front end was seamlessly integrated with standard Socrata open data tools and APIs to deliver rich, graphical, comparative features. Comparative tools are organized to provide the most relevant comparisons to users "out of the box" while the additional standard Socrata open data tools provides full access to all underlying data for users to take full control of the accessed data.

The DebtWatch web application supports the Treasurer's Office strategic goal to, "Utilize innovative outreach strategies to increase public awareness of the State Treasurer's Office and its Boards, Commissions, and Authorities and the various programs, services, and benefits available, and the contributions of our employees."

Concept

Problem:

The California State Treasurer's Office (STO) owns data on all debt issued by California State and local government entities, including election results regarding any proposed local or state level government debt initiatives throughout the State of California. Over 2.8 million fields of information reside in this data repository, representing debt issued since 1984.

The public had very limited access to the debt information which limited the public's ability to be informed about state and local debt. Such debts could directly impact individual constituent's taxes, services, and communities.

Past misuse of government funding has prompted the Treasurer to promote transparency and empower Californians to hold government accountable for borrowing decisions.

This empowerment could not be achieved with the limited access the public had to the Treasurer's existing debt data. The existing selection tool was also cumbersome and produced a raw file with no meaningful way of filtering or analyzing the data. Although this data may have worked for a few research agents, it was too limited to have any educational and empowering benefits to the general public.

Solution:

The solution was to build a new web based tool that would allow easy access to all California debt data and that would provide a graphical interface to filtering and comparative analysis tools for the public to explore and analyze the data. To this end the Treasurer built the DebtWatch web application. STO's DebtWatch web application features intuitive, visual tools that make it easier for the general public to explore debt data about their community, to download raw numbers, create charts and make comparisons among issuers, including comparing within the same types of issuers, such as within similar subgroups such as cities, counties, and special district. Users can track proposed and issued debt, cost of issuance as well as bond and tax election results.

Access to the debt information is graphically broken down through issuer types such as cities, counties, special districts, etc., using a "Debt Wheel" feature. Using another graphical feature, the "County Map", debt information can also be accessed through county geographical zones, regardless of the issuer type. This allows the users to easily compare like-to-like issuers. Using the Explore All Debt feature, users also have the ability to explore all debt data unfiltered, and to download the debt data to use with their own analysis tools. At any point in the compare and filtering process, DebtWatch gives users the ability to download the specific data that is produced by their filtering and comparative selections. DebtWatch also provides access to all the source documentation associated with every debt record. This access is provided as downloadable PDF documents of all associated issuance documentation. DebtWatch uses the encrypted hypertext transfer protocol, HTTPS, enabling administrative users to securely maintain and update the site from any client browser.

Significance

The California State Treasurer's DebtWatch application places 30 years of debt-related data in an open format for any user to analyze and compare. Open data allows information to be freely used, reused and redistributed by anyone. The Treasurer established this site to encourage users to review, compare, visualize, and analyze data -- and share their discoveries -- in real time.

Comparing and analyzing debt data takes only minutes to complete. All data provided to the public are submitted by the state, cities, counties, special districts, public education entities and other local governments since 1984.

The DebtWatch application interface allows users to view data in the form of exportable maps, charts and spreadsheets. This website is open to the general public and contains no confidential data.

The site does not collect or publish personal information. It is truly an open data site enabling people to connect with their government. The website complies with the State of California IT Accessibility Policy. The website collects cookies only to enable the analysis of trends in the use of this website. These cookies are anonymous and do not compromise user privacy or security.

Statistically, DebtWatch has dramatically increased debt data consumption by the public over its predecessor. In comparison, the previous debt issuance database had an average monthly page view of 227 while the new DebtWatch site averages 8,211 views monthly since its launch. This is a 3500 percent increase in usage. The DebtWatch application also makes data more accessible and easier to use compared to its predecessor. The public are now able to analyze information in significantly greater detail and perform new types of searches such as: Debt by County, Issuer Type and Explore All Debt.

Impact

The measurable return for the California State Treasurer is not seen through its cost savings, but rather the quick turnaround in providing data to its users and providing transparency in government to its people.

The real benefit of the DebtWatch web application is to the taxpayer, who wants to know what their government is doing in terms of debt. DebtWatch makes it easier for the public to effectively track, analyze and visualize debt-related data of their local governments. There are many different types of end users who spend the time to analyze this data – they can now do so with greater speed and accuracy. DebtWatch provides the toolkit necessary for its users to have ready access to California local government debt data along with a suite of associated data analysis tools. It is an empowering and engaging way to reconnect the public and their governments.