

Clarity on the budget

By Noah Berger and Stephen Crosby | November 17, 2007

IN THE past year, State House leaders have made considerable progress in making the budget process more transparent. Why is this important? Because budget and tax debates are ultimately about how the people of Massachusetts will use our resources together to do things that we can't do alone: protect the environment, create good schools for our children, build and maintain roads, provide a safety net, and keep our neighborhoods safe.

But people can participate meaningfully in that debate only if they have access to basic budget information, which has in the past been all too obscure. Has Governor Deval Patrick delivered on the promise to give people the tools to be engaged?

First some transparency here: along with other budget experts, we coauthored a report last fall outlining steps the state could take to create a budget process that everyone could understand. The recommendations became part of the gubernatorial debate, and an express priority of Patrick.

Since then, state government has made an enormous amount of budget information easily available. Until now, this reform has gotten little attention but everyone who cares about what our state government does should take a look at the budget website, www.mass.gov/gaa.

That website provides spending information on every area of state government.

You can click on any area for detailed information about this year's budget, and get budget and spending levels for the past three years. From there you can click on individual departments and see the mission of the department, laws and regulations related to it, and, often a link to a website with other useful information.

From the menu along the top of the main budget page, you can access a "budget tracking tool" that shows the final budget for each item, and the levels proposed by the governor, House, and Senate. This is updated throughout the budget process and allows you to compare spending proposals as the budget debate proceeds.

Finally, at the top of the budget tracking tool page there is a link to the governor's budget homepage. That page contains a wide array of additional materials that put the budget in context and help ordinary citizens to understand it: budget narrative, fiscal outlook,

financial statements, tax revenue information, nontax revenue, revenue forecast.

In addition to the governor's reforms, the House and Senate Ways and Means Committees are posting their budget proposals and all amendments on the Legislature's website and updating that information throughout their budget debates.

In providing access to all of this information, state government has taken dramatic steps to open up the budget process and has begun to make it possible for real and meaningful public participation by all residents.

There are, however, three additional steps that would help everyone be able to examine budget choices in a more meaningful way.

First, the budget should include a simple summary statement of all income and expenses, demonstrating whether and how the budget complies with our constitutional requirement to be balanced. This document would clearly show each revenue source and each category of spending. It would identify which revenue sources are ongoing and which are temporary (such as the use of the rainy day fund to balance the budget).

Second, the budget should include a statement with each line item describing whether new programs are being funded, and any cuts there might have been. Because spending levels often change as a result of inflation and caseload changes, it is impossible in the existing format to determine when increased or decreased spending represents a policy choice and what that choice is.

And third, the budget should be made available in print, and supplied at locations like libraries across the state. Some people don't have access to the Internet and many more don't feel comfortable navigating multiscreen systems to access information.

We are on the right track. Let's finish the job.

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