First Amendment Foundation releases report card on local government transparency

Websites created by Florida's cities and counties to provide citizens with information frequently fail to provide fundamental facts about the costs and consequences of decisions by those governments, a survey conducted by the First Amendment Foundation for Sunshine Week has revealed.

Overall, the websites of Florida's 67 counties and 47 of its cities earned only about half the possible credits on a transparency scorecard developed by the Foundation. The websites were evaluated by journalism students at the universities of Florida, South Florida and Miami, who were asked if they could find specific information – ranging from budgets to neighborhood crime information – through a reasonable search.

While most websites offered convenient links to everyday functions – seeking a permit, finding a park or bidding for a government contract – few made it easy for citizens to request public records.

And while almost every government posted its annual budget and detailed agendas for elected and appointed boards, records critical to understanding how a government operates – from financial analyses and a copy of its checkbook, to databases of vendors and financial disclosure forms filed by elected and appointed officials – were mostly unavailable.

"Many city and county websites include the stated goals of 'transparency' and 'accountability,'" said Barbara Petersen, president of the Tallahassee-based FAF. "But this survey shows that, in many ways, these governments fall short of those goals.

"On most websites, it's far easier to pay a water bill than it is to find out how much a government is paying to run the water department – and who's selling services to the department."

The survey rated information available under seven categories: financial, accountability, public meetings, contact information, public records, ease of use and other features, such as whether citizens could check on reported crimes in their neighborhoods (most couldn't.)

The average score of 65 counties (Calhoun County has no website, while the 67th county was scored as the city of Jacksonville) was 50 out of a possible 100 points. The average score of the 46 cities surveyed was 52.8.

On the high and low ends, the transparency of a website was directly related to the size and resources of a government. Each of the three lowest-scoring counties (Glades, Liberty and Washington) has fewer than 25,000 people. Similarly, the three lowest-scoring cities (Blountstown, Bonifay and Chipley) are tiny communities in the Florida Panhandle. Calhoun County, whose seat is Blountstown, is the only Florida county that doesn't have a website.

Conversely, large urban areas had the highest scores. Sarasota and Miami-Dade led the counties with scores of 84 and 81 respectively, while the top city was Jacksonville, with 80 points.

336 East College Ave., Suite 101
Tallahassee, FL 32301
floridafaf.org

Main 850.224.4555
Toll-Free 800.337.3518
Hotline 850.222.3518

But size wasn't always a determining factor. Hillsborough County, with more than 1.2 million people, scored just 44 while Columbia County, home to fewer than 70,000, scored a 77. Similarly, Hialeah, with more than 225,000 residents, scored 35 while Ft. Walton Beach, home to about 20,000, scored 70 points.

What follows is a summary of the scoring in each of the seven survey categories.

You can access the detailed First Amendment Foundation Score Card, a short list of the highest and lowest scores, a spreadsheet showing each of cities and counties did in those seven categories and the complete score sheets showing how each city and county did on every item surveyed by going to the following webpage: http://florida.nfoic.net/faf-report-card-results/.

FINANCIAL

Almost all of the cities and counties put their budgets online. (The exceptions were the three lowest-scoring counties and cities: Washington, Liberty and Glades; Blountstown, Bonifay and Marianna.) Most also posted some manner of analysis. But breakdowns of revenue and spending were often not posted separately and had to be derived by studying the budget. Only three cities (Deltona, Fort Walton Beach and Tallahassee) and six counties (Broward, Clay, Marion, Miami-Dade, Sarasota and Wakulla) posted check registers, which allow citizens to track who actually gets money. Just 11 cities posted their current property tax millage in an easily findable manner, though half the counties did. The average score for the cities was 11.5, for the counties 10. Miami-Dade scored a perfect 20 points, while Deltona and Fort Walton Beach, each with 18, led the cities.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Scores in this category were dismal, averaging 5.6 for the cities and 6 for the counties out of a possible 20 points. Six cities and eight counties scored a 0. Only one county, Miami-Dade, and not a single city surveyed posted a list of employees along with their salaries (though some did post a salary schedule of pay per position, and a few smaller municipalities posted a list of employees and their phone numbers.) St. Johns County did link to a Florida Times Union story listing county salaries.

Just seven cities and eight counties posted a list of people registered to lobby. A total of 19 cities and 23 counties posted a list of current vendors – critical for someone looking into possible self-dealing or political payoffs – but it wasn't always certain if the lists were 100 percent complete. Seven cities and 14 counties posted existing leases between the city and other entities. Only 16 cities and 30 counties posted spending information for quasi-public agencies associated with the cities – such as housing and airport authorities – that often control significant additional dollars. In short, even the governments that do a good job of showing how much money they take in and how much they spend do a poor job of informing taxpayers about where that money actually goes and who influences how it is spent.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

It's pretty clear that local governments have gotten the message that public meetings must be posted and that citizens are entitled to an advance look at the agendas – and backup materials – that will be considered by a city council or other

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board or commission. The 47 cities averaged 15 out of a possible 20 points – the highest average of any of the survey categories. Counties did not do quite as well, averaging 13 points. Five cities (Deltona, Fort Walton Beach, Hollywood, Lakeland and Vero Beach) and six counties (Columbia, Miami-Dade, Pinellas, Sarasota, Taylor and Volusia) earned perfect scores of 20. Generally, citizens also can count on finding minutes of past meetings (though not everyone breaks out votes in the minutes. Still, only 11 cities posted a clear statement of the new state statute giving citizens the legal right to speak at public meetings, and just 15 included a link to state statutes, notably the public records law. The counties did better: about half posted a reference to the right-to-speak statute, and most linked to or referenced the public meetings law.

CONTACT INFORMATION

The cities averaged 2.6 out of a possible 5 in this category, the counties 2.   As with agendas and minutes, virtually every city and county posted the names of commissioners, and some manner of contact information, but many did not indicate when they must run again. Most also posted names and contact information for the manager/administrator and department heads. But only a handful of cities - Daytona Beach and three in Broward County – and just one county (Broward) posted financial disclosure or conflict of interest forms filed by city commissioners. Broward passed a disclosure ordinance in 2010 following a corruption scandal that also applies to cities within its borders.

PUBLIC RECORDS

This was another dismal category, with the average score just 7 out of a possible 16 for both cities and counties. Just 11 cities and 17 counties scored 12 or more points, while 7 cities and 6 counties scored a 0, including otherwise user-friendly sites in Fort Lauderdale and Tallahassee. The latter has links to literally dozens of possible responses to the question "How can I...," including everything from finding a park and calculating one's carbon footprint to accessing pictures of the mayor at public events. But there's not a single word of advice about how to file a public records request, nor any indication that a citizen can do so electronically. The city of Jacksonville and Columbia County had the only perfect scores.

Only 20 cities' websites contained a clear statement of a citizen's right to obtain public records, and only 19 allowed a citizen to file a records request electronically. That means that residents in most cities and half the counties in the state must request records the old-fashioned way, by making the trip down to city hall or the county courthouse and finding someone who can help them.

EASE OF USE

This was one of the higher-scoring categories, with cities averaging 6.6 and the counties 6 out of a possible 10 points. Five cities (Hollywood, Marianna, Miramar, Palm Bay and Pompano Beach) racked up perfect scores, while 18 others registered an 8. Eight counties scored 10s (Brevard, Charlotte, Clay, Lafayette, Leon, Monroe, Seminole and Volusia) while 19 had 8 ratings.

Virtually every site allows users to download information, although documents like budgets are usually available only as PDFs, meaning the data in them can't be conveniently crunched. Most sites are also word or phrase searchable, though

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some sites utilize Google applications that include advertisements in the results, or show previous years' budgets or other reports in random rather than chronological order. The least-common feature, available on only 15 city and 20 county websites, was a link enabling citizens to provide feedback to their government.

OTHER FEATURES

There were only 11 perfect scores of 9 (the cities of Miami Gardens, Panama City, Sarasota and Tallahassee, and Charlotte, Columbia, Escambia, Gilchrist, Lafayette, Manatee and Sarasota counties.)   Most city and county sites posted building and zoning regulations – critical information for residents seeking information about what changes are possible in their neighborhoods. But only 15 cities provided links that would enable property owners to check their assessments, and just 11 posted information about how a resident could appeal his or her assessment. By contrast, 47 counties had links to assessments and 31 to appeals information. Only 18 cities – and just 11 counties -- posted links that allow citizens to check on reported crimes in their neighborhoods.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Though Florida cities and counties have entered the Internet age – all of the 47 cities and 65 of the 66 counties surveyed had websites, most have a long way to go before their governments can be considered proactively transparent.

While it's unquestionably helpful to citizens to be able to access a copy of the city's budget, it would be even more helpful to include lists of expenditures and **companies or individuals** doing business with the city or county.

Advance copies of agendas are important, but so too are the financial disclosure forms filed by officials, as well as filings by commissioners on conflicts of interest.

And while many websites make a real effort to be helpful to citizens – featuring "How can I…" FAQ pages and drop-down menus that allow users to easily navigate the site – too few include clear statements of citizens' rights to public records and how to access them online.

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