



JOSH MANDEL

STATE TREASURER OF OHIO

Ashtabula Star Beacon
By Justin Dennis
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Two county municipalities have joined more than 100 local governments across Ohio on OhioCheckbook.com, a new state fiscal transparency tool that launched last year by the Ohio Treasurer.

"By partnering and posting local government checkbooks ... taxpayers across Ohio are empowered with a powerful tool to hold public officials accountable within their communities," Treasurer Josh Mandel said Thursday in a release announcing the website's expansion.

The public website now hosts more than \$14.2 billion of spending data for 114 participating state school districts and municipalities, including Andover Village and Hartsgrove Township, which were among the first wave of local governments added to the site.

"If anybody wanted to know what we spend and where we spend it, it's in there," said Cathy Williams, Andover Village fiscal officer. "It's tax money. It's all open anyway.

The site, developed with the help of California-based web developer OpenGov, details all of the state's fiscal data — more than \$473 billion dollars going back eight years. Each city, township, school district or other entity gets its own dedicated spending site. OhioCheckbook.com has been searched more than 325,000 times since launch, according to the treasurer's office.

"(The website is) very user-friendly. ... It's simple — done up almost like a checkbook form," Williams said.

Each site features interactive charts and graphs that allow users to breakdown spending categories and see individual transactions and the vendors paid. Visitors can also search transactions by keyword, department, category or vendor. They can also compare spending data year-to-year or with other agencies. Checkbook data are also shareable on social media.

State Auditor Dave Yost called OhioCheckbook.com the "most important transparency initiative since the public records act."

It's the first time in history a state has bared all of its spending in such a format, according to the treasurer's office. In March, Ohio claimed the top spot — and a record perfect score — on a transparency report, conducted by a federal public interest group, because of the website's launch in December.

Now the fiscal reporting is being extended to local public entities. In April, the state treasurer asked close to 4,000 governments and school districts to submit their data, at no cost. The Checkbook reporting process is completely voluntary, but Williams said Andover Village "wanted to be on the forefront."



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Andover Village's and Hartsgrove Township's Checkbook data goes back to 2013. In 2014, Andover's biggest expense was police; while Hartsgrove spent the most on highways.

"The program will not only provide transparency to our constituents, but offers tools to make our operations more efficient," said Patricia Neuberger, Hartsgrove fiscal officer. "We look forward to exploring the site, along with our residents, to deliver the most cost-effective services for our tax dollars."

Williams said she submitted previous years' books in an exported spreadsheet. Though the state hasn't yet requested Checkbook data on a monthly, quarterly or annual basis, she said she'll likely get in the habit of sending the village's figures around the beginning of the year.

Top three spending programs and percentage of total expenses in 2014, per OhioCheckbook.com:

Andover Village

- Police enforcement: \$273,966 (21.4 percent)
 - Debt service: \$208,323 (16.3 percent)
 - Other sanitary sewers and sewage: \$121,131 (9.5 percent)
- Highest-paid service vendor: Anthem Health, \$115,320 (9 percent of total spent to vendors)

Hartsgrove Township

- Highways: \$246,252 (46.2 percent)
 - Note principal payment: \$88,798 (16.7 percent)
 - Administrative: \$77,817 (14.6 percent)
- Highest-paid service: Treasurer Patricia Neuberger, \$12,868 (16.5 percent of total spent for services)

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