ADDRESSING THE
FISCAL TRANSPARENCY INITIATIVE

Providing a self-service web portal for on-demand constituent access

Abstract

Learn how government agencies can leverage existing technology and industry best practices in supporting the Fiscal Transparency Initiative.

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Introduction

Transparency is the new "Green". President Obama decreed that "Open Government" is the new standard and ever since this Executive Order was signed on May 9, 2013, all levels of government have been working toward the goal of providing timely and relevant data to their constituents. A recent survey by the Center for Digital Government indicated that providing transparency and open government is on the top 10 list for Counties, and #1 Priority for Cities.

Challenges

From the outside looking in, government agencies and all their idiosyncrasies can seem inaccessible to the common citizen. Separate from most of the rules and policies that guide life in the private sector, the realm of the governing world is often a mysterious one – especially with regards to budgets and spending. Viewing these fiscal records normally requires a deeper knowledge of the government system and a dogged persistence in pestering officials for their information. For the average citizen, this creates frustration as well as mistrust in the accuracy of the data. For the government employees involved, addressing recurring records requests entails the use of a tedious bureaucratic system that can create error and wastes valuable time.

Many government agencies typically have at least one or more involved citizens or Commissioners who are constantly requesting special financial reports. These individual requests take time for the staff to prepare, which takes away from other important daily tasks. In this new era of transparency in government, those old channels of information gathering are no longer necessary.

A Better Approach

Why not put this financial information on the web and allow citizens and others to get the data and perform their own analysis? With the proper fiscal transparency system in place, concerned citizens gain on-demand access to public information. Connected directly to any town, city, county, or state government's fiscal record, the citizen is in total control of and empowered by what was once insider information.
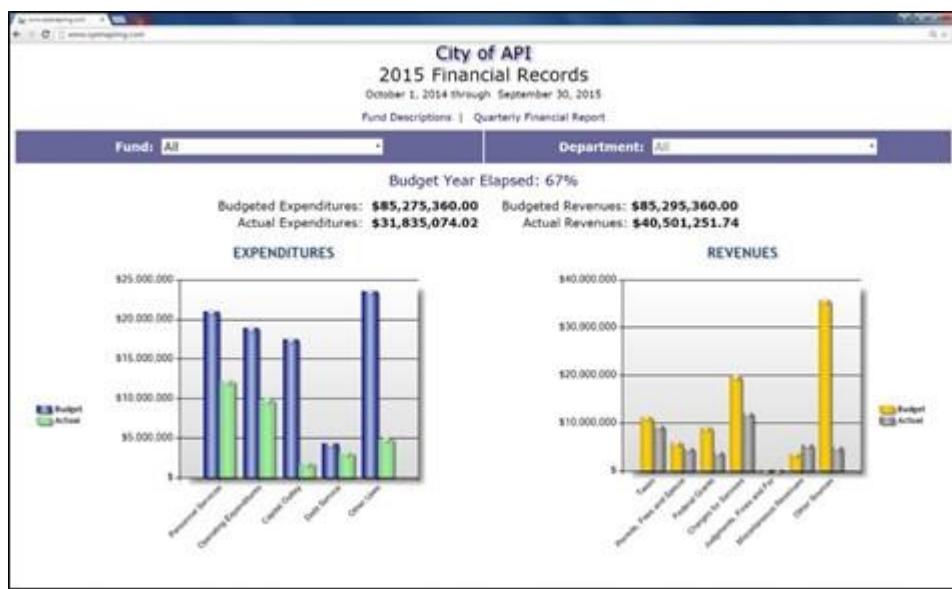
Allowing Citizens to see how their tax dollars are spent and how the revenues are being collected provides a level of trust between your organization and those you serve. Transparency empowers the citizens to inspect every detail of the budget, to understand it, and to voice their opinions.

Transparency helps internal staff as well, eliminating the need to constantly prepare, print and distribute reports to internal departments so they can monitor their departmental budgets. Since all fiscal data is readily available on the web and on-demand, department directors and management staff have access to all the information they need when they need it.

A Glimpse of the Future

At the heart of the Fiscal Transparency Portal lies the high-level Executive View of spending and taxation. Here, bold yet simple charts display incoming and outgoing payments by

department level and category, allowing anyone with internet access to see exactly how much a government spent on its utilities management, police department, personnel, and much more. Curious about one or more of these departments or services, the viewer could then expand information specific to certain categories. At this level, intra-departmental expenses are broken down into categories as before, which can each be viewed on their own similarly. In this way, any viewer of the Fiscal Transparency system is able to see or read expenses and revenue for the entire agency.

Benefits of a Cloud-based Solution

Today, many public and private sector organizations are leveraging Cloud technology to power their internal and external applications. Leveraging a Public or Private Cloud infrastructure typically helps government agencies become more agile, reduce IT costs and gain a robust disaster recovery and business continuity solution. The result is that many government agencies are turning to Cloud-based solutions for their Fiscal Transparency Portals.

A Positive Outcome

A Fiscal Transparency solution connects citizens directly to their government's taxing and spending habits via a dynamic, online portal. Taking a once drawn-out and lengthy process that only worked on single requests at a time, Government Agencies now enjoy a comprehensive solution that transforms transparency from a process into a destination, a place anyone can visit and instantly discover records that were once shrouded behind layers of paperwork. This innovation could not have come at a better time, too, as governments from the local to international levels push for transparency and trust between themselves and their constituents.

A Fiscal Transparency Portal creates a tangible connection between the public and the government sector. Easy and quick access to information is the expectation and way of the future. The fast-paced nature of business with instant access to information through the internet has grown exponentially as sophisticated processes previously handled by the supercomputer in the past have now evolved to the computers we carry around in our pockets each and every day. Fiscal Transparency is the first step forward in a system that has been stuck in the past for far too long, and the preemptive solution to the next generation's government apathy.

Making this information accessible and presented in an understandable fashion has mass appeal not only for the casual seeker, but also the serious auditor. The appeal for transparency ranges from the media, citizens, internal staff as well as managers and those elected officials. With the right transparency solution in place, everyone will glean valuable and timely information as well as reap the reward of open and transparent government.

Fiscal Transparency Benefits in a Nutshell

- **Improves Staff productivity.** Reduces staff time to complete both public and internal information requests.
- **Improves Customer Service.** Provides on-demand access to fiscal information.
- **Build Trust within Your Community.** Making more information publicly available is an empowering act that will help rebuild trust between citizens and government.
- **Empower and educate Citizens**

Next Steps

Now is the time to start investigating how you can quickly and easily leverage existing solutions in the market and take the first step towards Fiscal Transparency.

Providing a fiscal transparency solution does not have to be a daunting task. The first approach is to discover what your Citizenry is most interested in. Determining the nature of most of your public records requests is a good place to start. Do you have a squeaky wheel in your community? Someone who frequently shows up at your Commission meetings to express their opinions? Consider their queries as a starting base. For most communities, expenditures by the organization top the list; however monitoring budgeted and more importantly collected revenues are equally important in determining the fiscal health of the community. Do you start by providing the minutia or summary level information? Do you provide detailed salary information of public employees or a listing of vendor payments? Once you have determined what the problem is you are trying to solve is the first step in providing the right solution.

There are a number of fiscal transparency solutions on the market, as well as the option to build your own. In evaluating your options, keep these factors in mind:

- Provide information in an easy and understandable way – government organizations and budgets are complicated. The average citizen doesn't know the ins/outs of 'government' like you do. Make sure you are presenting the data in simple charts and graphs that someone without a degree in Economics can make sense of.

- Provide summarized information with the ability to drill down to more detailed layers. The old expression of 'can't see the forest for the trees' rule applies here.
- Start with low hanging fruit and expand from there. Once an open portal is created, you can monitor the activity on that page and expand your 'openness' accordingly. For instance, if you start by providing expenditure and revenue data, perhaps the next step is providing access to your approved government contracts for that fiscal year.
- Don't make a hasty decision on a transparency solution just to cross that item off your to-do list. Finding an appropriate solution for your community is an important decision. Don't' take the one-size-fits-all approach in providing this important service.

About Advanced Processing & Imaging

Advanced Processing & Imaging, Inc.® (API) develops and sells process automation and document management solutions. For nearly two decades, API solutions haves helped City and County Government Agencies speed business processes, increase productivity and reduce operating costs through more efficient business execution and reduced reliance on paper-based forms, documents and reports.

API's Fiscal Transparency Portal is a Cloud-based service offered to governments to address the Fiscal Transparency Initiative and bridge the information gap. With an interface tailored to your organization and its records, this Web-based portal provides an immensely simple shortcut to total fiscal transparency for the constituents you serve.

For more information and a personalized demonstration call **(800) 430 7011** or e-mail us at **info@apimg.com**. You can also visit **www.apimg.com**

About the Author

Kathi Pletzke is the Director of Transparency Technology at API. Prior to joining API in 2015, Kathi spent 30 years in IT leadership positions for the public sector. Her work has been recognized in many local and national publications. These smart technology solutions have also garnered multiple awards including the Public Technology Institute, Computer World, FLGISA and GMIS. She is a frequent invited speaker and subject matter expert on government technology and transparency.