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Byron Schломach, guest column: Mystery meat

Friday, June 09, 2006

AUSTIN — What's the bottom line?

With relative ease and simplicity any taxpayer should be able to find the answers to some pretty basic questions regarding what government is doing with his or her money.

How much money has been, or will be, spent? What has or will it be spent on? Who is spending it? What is it accomplishing?

The current Texas state budget runs almost 900 pages and just a quarter inch shy of two inches thick. It documents the almost \$140 billion appropriated for fiscal years 2006 and 2007, of state, federal and some local (from school districts) funds.

Much of the volume of the state budget is made up of "riders," special, detailed instructions the Legislature gives to the 188 separate agencies, including universities, to which these funds are distributed.

Additionally, the budget contains lists of "outcomes" and "efficiencies" — measures supposedly there to answer at least a couple of the questions mentioned above. Whether accidentally or on purpose, though, these measures do not really tell us very much.

For example, under the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, there is an "outcome/impact" measure for the "Percent of Identified Noncompliant Sites and Facilities for Which Appropriate Action Is Taken."

This measure, a goal really, is set at 85 percent. Why is it not 100 percent? Or how about the "Percent of Inspected or Investigated Air Sites in Compliance," with a goal of 98 percent. While it is an admirable goal to have all air sites in compliance, could not this measure create a perverse incentive to inspect and investigate sites in compliance and ignore violators?

In the budget, no history or context is given to any of the outcome and efficiency measures. Central missions and goals go unstated. Ultimate results seem, well, ultimately unimportant. This is true for all state agencies.

Currently, individual programs are almost impossible to identify in the state budget. That must be changed, making it more accessible and useful. Additionally, generally accessible documents clearly detailing the strategic plans for each program should be produced, including sound measures for defining success at the end of each year and over the course of the program.

Taxpayers need to know what is really being accomplished with their money. If such answers cannot be had, then taxpayers' money should stay with the taxpayers.

Byron Schломach is chief economist at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

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