



THE BUCKEYE INSTITUTE

**Interested Party Testimony Submitted to the Ohio
House State and Local Government Committee on
House Bill 40**

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Thank you, Chairman Anielski, Vice Chairman Hambley, Ranking Member Bishoff, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 40. My name is Greg Lawson, and I am the Senior Policy Analyst at The Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions here in Columbus.

Just as “sunlight is the world’s best disinfectant,” we at The Buckeye Institute believe fiscal transparency to be the best way to make governments accountable to their citizens.

We have long argued that showing Ohio taxpayers *how* their elected officials spend their hard-earned tax dollars will help citizens better understand what their government does. And with that better understanding, citizens will ask better questions, encourage more effective change, and demand greater fiscal accountability. Over time, a more informed citizenry leads to better, more efficient, and responsive government—a goal on which everyone here can agree.

To help illuminate at least one aspect of state spending for our citizens, The Buckeye Institute developed a searchable database showing publicly available salaries for state employees, public school teachers, and some local government workers. Our database, though useful, only shows a fraction of the state’s true spending.

The Ohio Checkbook, created by Treasurer Mandel, has taken significant steps toward providing greater fiscal transparency for Ohio and her citizens by offering a fuller picture of government spending. Ohio is now a transparency leader nationally, with sister states following her shining example. As the Committee is aware, Ohio’s transparency score according to U.S. PIRG skyrocketed from 46th in 2014 to 1st in 2015 following Mr. Mandel’s efforts with Ohio Checkbook.¹

¹ Benjamin Davis and Phineas Baxandall, “Following the Money 2014,” U.S. PIRG, April 2014, http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/Following%20the%20Money%20vUS%20v2_0.pdf; Phineas Baxandal, PhD. And Michelle Surka, “Following the Money 2016,” U.S. PIRG, 2015, <http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/Following%20the%20Money%202015%20vUS.pdf>.

House Bill 40 simply helps secure Ohio's progress on transparency and government accountability by codifying the Ohio Checkbook initiative. As the Committee is undoubtedly aware, such codification will help protect Ohio Checkbook from blustery political winds that might threaten to uproot this important program down the road.

Of course, even with a codified Ohio Checkbook, much work remains to be done before Ohio and her local governments reach full fiscal transparency. Ohio has *thousands* of local governmental bodies and taxing authorities. As we noted in our study of Ohio's local governments, *Joining Forces*, Ohio has an average of 41 separate taxing authorities per county ranging from townships to schools to library districts. Cuyahoga County alone boasts over 100 local government entities—and *all* of them require greater transparency and accountability.²

Especially today, as the General Assembly debates the adequacy of local government resources, a brighter light must shine on all levels of state and local government spending. Without proper lighting, taxpayers remain in the dark, lacking ready access to the information they need to hold their elected representatives and public officers accountable.

The Buckeye Institute applauds the cooperative relationship forged between Mr. Mandel's office and many of Ohio's local governments. Hundreds of local governments already have displayed their own "checkbooks" online at Ohio Checkbook. But this effort is just the beginning. True transparency won't be achieved until every governmental unit has made its account books fully available online for you, me, and every Ohio taxpayer to inspect.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to answering any questions that the Committee might have.

² See Greg R. Lawson, "Joining Forces: Rethinking Ohio's Government Structure," The Buckeye Institute, October 3, 2011, <https://www.buckeyeinstitute.org/research/detail/joining-forces-rethinking-ohios-government-structure>.