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House State and Local Government Committee
HB 40 – Government Expenditure Database
Testimony of Dennis Hetzel, Executive Director

Chairwoman Anielski, Vice Chair Hambley, Ranking Member Bishoff, and members of the House Committee on State and Local Government, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in favor of House Bill 40. At the Ohio News Media Association, we believe this bill, sponsored by Representatives Dever and Goodman, will improve and increase the access that journalists and all citizens have to government expenditure information.

This bill takes existing public records and places them in a format that would make them far easier to access and review in any number of ways that modern software and information technology allow. The OhioCheckbook.com website unveiled by Treasurer Mandel (<http://tos.ohio.gov/transparency/ohios-online-checkbook>) has received very positive feedback since it was unveiled. My members have praised not only the ease of use, but also the increasing amount of information available from local governments, pension systems, and state institutions. Future treasurers should continue to offer this site.

As a former reporter and editor myself, I am confident that this should lead to more and better coverage of government expenditures across the state. Data, in and of itself, often does not answer questions, but it allows those who utilize it to ask better questions. Presenting expenditure data in the way outlined in HB 40 will lead to better questions and greater accuracy of reporting. It also makes it easier for everyday citizens to participate in the process. A related benefit for participating entities is that many public records requests related to expenditures are easily handled by pointing requestors to the database. This saves staff time and expense.

In testimony on a similar bill in the last legislative session, we urged that the bill include expenditure data from community schools. The LSC analysis suggests that, as written, HB 40 is unclear. We encourage the committee to require the OhioCheckbook website to show the expenditure of public dollars by nonprofit and private entities operating “charter” schools – at least in aggregate amounts if not to checkbook-level detail. Assessing the success or failure of these schools must include the ability to track what happens to taxpayer dollars. This also raises the broader point of eventually requiring other governmental entities to participate, though many do so voluntarily. For example, one might ask why school district employee salaries are singled out but there is no requirement to publish information regarding other local government employees.

In terms of statewide entities, we believe it is logical to require participation by state universities, pension funds and JobsOhio – at least in some manner. Again, note that nothing in the law creates “new” public records. We simply are making it easier to provide access to such information involving expenditures of public dollars.

Thank you again for your consideration, and I would be glad to answer any questions.