

Facts & Figures

The Inner-workings of Local Government Finances

A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 1 Vol. 1

A FAIR Mission : Education

FAIR Government is an education organization dedicated to the research and publication of local government budget data, and the online publication of documents that support government spending patterns. Such documents will include municipal contracts between governments and unions, which will illustrate why one municipality spends money one way compared to another. Fair will at all times remain non-biased, and non-editorial in its approach to the presentation of fiscal data.

Why Not?

A group of motivated people have gotten together to tackle the toughest government management issue of our time - FISCAL TRANSPARENCY.

Will You Be Joining Them?

Two years ago a small but diverse group of people formalized a project they'd been discussing for years. The main question the group wanted to tackle:

“Where does all the government money go? In fact, where does it all come from?”

This simple line of thinking led to the creation of a not-for-profit, non-editorial and non-partisan organization called F.A.I.R. Government.

Why is so little known about how local government spends its money? The government certainly has resources (news conferences, staff,

websites) but so little true information about government finances ever seems to be released.

And if so little information is available, aren't the chances to recruit fresh faces and new leadership that much slimmer?

Why We Got Involved

In order to understand FAIR you may need to set aside any personal biases you might have. Government isn't always corrupt. Elected officials aren't all selfish. Not all roads are full of pot holes.

FAIR doesn't begin with the assumption that local government spending is being mismanaged. Rather, it helps to answer questions such as : What does it cost to pave a road, build a bridge, or deliver clean fresh water? Those are basic questions that have specific answers. There shouldn't be fuzzy answers to these issues.

Our mission at FAIR is to bring an atmosphere of intelligence to the public debate. To get people away from wandering generalities and toward meaningful specifics.

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Founders File

Like many of us, I'm a student of government and politics, especially here in Western New York. I've found myself on all sides of dozens of issues as I searched for an answer to the one burning question:



What will it take to make our community the best community in the world?

Passions run deep in government and politics in WNY, but there is one common thread. Everyone loves this region and wants it to succeed.

I found, as many of us do, that supporting any one cause, or any one candidate, turned out to be blind alley's on a search for true change. Yet that seemed like a contradiction, because it was people who originally built WNY to prominence. So, people are the key - people make the difference.

How can we all look at the same data and come up with different interpretations?

What we need to initiate success are more people involved in government. More talents to weigh in on the important topics of the day. We need to pick more brains.

But we also need better informed people. That is key. We need data that all people can work from and come to common solutions. Anything, broken down to its smallest denominations, can be understood and improved.

This is the heart of FAIR Government. Our mission is to provide comprehensive information about all local government relative to how they raise and spend money.

I started alone, then contacted other like-minded people, and we've formed a nucleus to create a knowledge base and to try to make a difference in our community. We don't want to tell anyone else to do it, and we don't want to demand the government do it. We're going to do it. We hope you'll join us and contribute in any way you can to the cause.

We're the richest country in the world. And although there may not be a lack of money, there is certainly a lack of understanding about how public money is raised and spent.

Thomas R. Christy, Founder
FAIR Government

How Did Things Get This Way?

Local government is big business.

The yearly budgets of local government in Western New York alone can be conservatively estimated at \$3 billion (we'll have the exact figure online soon). There are NO private businesses in the region that can match that economic impact.

Imagine coordinating such a huge fiscal impact. With such fiscal clout government could literally change the face of WNY. We could be anything we wanted to be.

This is a consideration: That there is not necessarily a lack of money in government, but a lack of knowledge about the money we do have. A lack of knowledge causes errors to be made. Errors get compounded when poor decisions are made, primarily because of a lack of knowledge.

The Size Of It All

We typically think only of county, town or other municipal governments. But there are many more forms which get much less attention.

According to the U.S. Census, there are 87,849 units of local government throughout the country.

“For Census Bureau statistical purposes, a government is defined as an organized entity subject to public accountability, whose officials are popularly elected or are appointed by public officials, and which has sufficient discretion in the management of its affairs to distinguish it as separate from the administrative structure of any other government unit. The Census Bureau recognizes five basic types of local governments: counties, municipalities, townships, school districts, and special districts.”

2002 U.S. Census of Governments

This means things like transportation authorities, water authorities and even the new Erie County Fiscal Stability Authority count as units of local government.

In the eight-county region of Western New York, excluding entities such as “authorities”, there are 324 local governments.

County	Cities	Towns	Villages	School Districts
Erie	3	25	15	27
Niagara	3	12	5	10
Chautauqua	2	27	15	18
Cattaraugus	2	32	13	13
Allegany	0	13	6	8
Genesee	1	13	6	8
Orleans	0	10	4	5
Wyoming	0	16	9	5
Totals	9	148	73	94

Is that too many governments? [Who's to say with any definition until more is understood about each]. And, not just understood by a few, but understood by anyone who wants to know. More brains on the problem, as organizational experts might say.

FAIR is a long-term solution, not a quick fix. It wasn't borne from any single government crisis or event.



We know we need more people involved in government. We really need more knowledgeable people involved in government. In order to have more knowledgeable people, there has to be information freely available to as great a segment of the population as possible.

It's easy to say government is broken. It's much more satisfying to do something about it.- And ultimately satisfying to create an educational opportunity for others.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUDGET INFORMATION IS
CONSTANTLY ADDED TO
FAIR-GOVERNMENT.ORG**

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There are more complicated questions such as how much does it cost to educate our children or revitalize neighborhoods? Not some total figure, nor a cost-per-child figure, but the details of what makes up those figures. Details are crucial.

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But How?

In this age of immediate communication we seem to be focused on the constant change and not the power of archiving.

Government "plans" are printed and then shelved. Audits are announced and then forgotten. Why aren't these things made available and then linked to each other and plans followed, tracked, and monitored?

Ten years ago this wouldn't have been possible. But it's been possible for long enough that we can generally project it's not going to happen - unless we make it happen.

How is it possible? Every penny of spending should be available online. Every method a municipality uses to raise money should be described and made easily understandable.

Seeing is believing. This information needs to be seen to be believed. It needs to be thorough to be understood.

Making A Difference

It's important to remember that FAIR was not formed as a knee-jerk reaction to any one government issue or spending situation. There simply is no one place where local government information can be found.

Someone once said "making money is easy; making a difference is hard." FAIR is a difference-making organization.

It's Up To Us

No matter what the issue is, you shouldn't sit and wait for someone else to do something about it.

Fiscal transparency, to the degree necessary, won't be done by government. It's a huge undertaking, probably done by some "monomaniac on a mission" as Tom Peters wrote in "In Search of Excellence".

Read on. Visit the website. Consider joining.

Make a difference.

Research Focus 1st Quarter '06

In addition to continuing the mission of the organization, FAIR may work on a variety of germane projects based on current events. Chart our progress by viewing the work online at www.fair-government.org

Current Project: Erie County 4-year Fiscal Plan, linked to the budget-saving matrix

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Get Involved Today

It's easier than you think!

FAIR Government is a not-for-profit, non-editorial and non-partisan effort to educate ourselves, and others, about the inner-workings of local government at all levels. Your contribution will go towards building a knowledge-network to remove the cloak of mystery surrounding government, mostly in its financial dealings.

Yes, please accept my contribution of: \$500 \$250 \$200 \$100 \$50 \$_____

I'm tired of waiting for someone else to change the way government operates. I'm ready to commit, and I want to make the leadership of tomorrow more educated than the leaders of yesterday.

Please record my contribution as follows
 and send information to me whenever
 necessary

FAIR is a privately funded 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization. All donations are tax deductible as allowed by law.

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Please clip and mail to: FAIR Government, P.O. Box 402, Buffalo, N.Y. 14223-0402