

State, Portland release fiscal snapshots to increase citizen involvement

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Easy-to-Read Reports Are First of Their Kind in National Initiative to Facilitate Citizen Understanding and Participation in Debates on Fiscal Priorities

PORTLAND, Ore.â€”The City of Portland and the State of Oregon released four-page fiscal snapshots today, as part of a national initiative by the Association of Government Accountants (AGA) to bring clarity to fiscal reporting in municipal, county and state governments. Portland is the first metropolitan city and Oregon the first state government in the nation to issue such reports in AGAâ€™s Citizen Centric project, which kicked off in March.

The initiative aims to bring more citizens into discussions over local fiscal priorities by making government financial documents short and easy to understand. Through this nationwide campaign, the AGA has encouraged municipal, county and state governments to publish straightforward reports about their fiscal condition that provide an honest and clear answer to the question â€œAre we better off today than we were last year?â€•

â€œGovernment fiscal assessments generally read like telephone books, with more pages of footnotes than the average citizen knows what to do with,â€• said Relmond Van Daniker, AGA executive director. â€œThe Citizen Centric project is about getting back to what accountants are meant to do â€“ crunch the numbers and make them understandable for the people we serve.â€•

The reports measure performance in Fiscal Year 2006, complete with the past year's accomplishments as well as the challenges that lie ahead. It lays out in easy-to-read charts: breakdowns of revenues by source, expenditures by function and, in the case of Portland, even city service statistics (e.g., how many emergency phone calls were made or the annual water usage per capita). The full Oregon report is available [here](#); the City of Portland's is available [here](#).

The City of Portland report celebrates a number of successes in 2006, including being named "America's Cleanest City" by Reader's Digest. Other accomplishments include the creation of the largest free wireless network of its kind in a U.S. city; the improvement of overall satisfaction with police services for the first time in several years; and the continuation of a 10-year decline in the crime rate, which have brought crimes against persons down 56 percent. Moving forward, the city lists among its challenges an increasing street maintenance backlog and a steadily increasing adult homeless population.

"Good governance requires good information. The Citizen Centric project allows us to engage Portland residents on the question of fiscal priorities in a format short enough to start more Portlanders discussing these issues," said Drummond Kahn, Portland's Director of Audit Services in the City Auditor's Office. "For residents, this is the equivalent of taking a look at your city's check book" where the money came from and where it went. And that informs a better civic discussion." Last year, the city auditor's performance measurement report, its 16th annual, received an AGA National Award for Excellence "for the third year in a row."

The State of Oregon report highlights a number of successful projects in the past year, among them the undertaking of the state's largest public works project in half a century; bolstering its programs that make it a national leader in the protection of the environment; and helping every low-income family afford tuition for higher education. Like in many states, education and health care are the biggest challenges that lie ahead. The report notes that, though state funding for higher education has increased, total funding for schools has not kept pace with inflation.

"This initiative is about honestly reporting back to our citizens and saying, 'This is what's been done well, and this is where we're going to need to improve in the years to come,'" said Oregon State Controller John Radford. "This state learned long ago that you can't move forward without its citizens weighing in, and we hope this report is a big step in making that process easier."

Van Daniker concluded, "Portland and the State of Oregon reminded us today that bringing citizens into the discussion about priorities is what American government is all about. That's a lesson so many of our local governments can learn from."