



The Maryland Public Policy Institute

GOVERNMENT  
TRANSPARENCY  
IN MARYLAND

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The Maryland Public Policy Institute

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# GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY IN MARYLAND

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## **INTRODUCTION**

TRANSPARENCY IS CRITICAL TO THE EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENRY in a democratic government. In order to hold members of government accountable for their actions, citizens must be able to find relevant information without undue burden. In the past, interested citizens often had to go to a central location and search through physical records to obtain any sort of information about their government. Today, thankfully, the Internet has made obtaining such information much easier.

Still, the Internet does not work magic. Without cooperation from within a government, citizens can be quite limited in their ability to obtain information. Transparency, then, involves more than simple recognition that citizens need information about their government in order to participate in it. Transparency includes the understanding that it is the government's duty to make information about its workings widely and easily available.

Today, the most effective way of achieving this goal is through the use of the Internet. Government websites can offer an enormous amount of information to thousands of interested citizens simultaneously, serving constituents far more efficiently than a telephone system or public records hall ever could. Meetings can be recorded and streamed live, without issues of distance and capacity. All of these things are possible, but whether or not they are actually implemented by a particular government's website is another matter. Thus, the primary purpose of this report is to evaluate Maryland's state and county websites for effectiveness in fostering transparency.

Although the use of the Internet is critical to fostering transparency, it does pose challenges of its own. Simply keeping track of the various state and local websites can be a daunting task, and citizens often must invest a considerable amount of time searching for the information they require. Accordingly, a secondary purpose of this report is to offer a consolidated list of Maryland's state and local websites, when possible including direct links to various documents. Hopefully this information will be useful in constructing a transparency website for Maryland, which citizens can use as a portal to various government websites.

Evaluating transparency is not always an easy task. The Sunshine Review's<sup>1</sup> transparency checklist is<sup>2</sup> a helpful starting point. The transparency checklist suggests that government websites should provide information about the following basic items: budgets; contracts; meetings; elected and administrative officials; lobbying and ethics; performance and financial audits; public information and records; and

taxes. However, a simple yes or no checklist hardly provides enough information to assess a government's transparency.

With this in mind, this study required more thorough evaluation of many of the items noted above. For example, instead of simply determining whether or not a county has placed this year's budget online, the study also accounts for the ease of locating the budget and searching files, and if the file was too large for dialup Internet users to be able to download in a reasonable amount of time. The reasoning behind this kind of thorough evaluation should be obvious – what good is making a budget available online if many citizens are not able to download and examine it?

What follows is a presentation for each item of Sunshine Review's transparency checklist, including an explanation of what information was sought and an evaluation of the relevant state and local entities. The conclusion of the report contains general suggestions for improving transparency in Maryland's governments. It is important to note that this report is an evaluation of the information that is publicly available online. Thus, when an entity does not receive a positive mark for some criterion, it does not mean the information does not exist (in many cases, the government is required by law to maintain the information).

For information to meet the standard used in this report, it must be both online (i.e., accessible over the Internet, not just a paper document that you can request over the phone) and publicly accessible (i.e., not hidden behind a password-protected portal or obscured in some other manner). Searches for information were in-depth, and far more thorough than the average website visitor's search methods. However, it is possible that some information was overlooked, if such information happened to be located in an obscure or unusual location. Searches were conducted throughout July and August 2008, and it is likely that some of the websites evaluated have been updated since that time.

## **BUDGETS**

One piece of information critical to government transparency is an entity's budget. By examining the budget, citizens can see exactly from where a government obtains its revenues and how much money it spends on various services. Table 1 presents an evaluation of budget transparency for Maryland's state government and 23 counties. In evaluating budget transparency, the following criteria were used:

1. Is the FY 2009 budget available online?
2. Are budgets from previous years available online? While budgets typically contain comparisons to the years immediately prior, in order to see changes over a longer period of time, citizens need to be able to access full budgets from previous years.
3. Are revenues and expenses, two key areas of interest, presented clearly in the form of pie charts? In order to receive a positive mark, both revenues and expenses must be presented, not just one or the other.
4. What file format is used? Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF) is a widely used open standard readable on almost any computer system, regardless of hardware or software. It is also easily printable.
5. Is the file less than 10 MB in size, or for budgets that are presented as multiple files, is the total size less than 10 MB? While a 10 MB file will take less than a minute to download on most broadband Internet connections, for the thousands of Marylanders still using dialup Internet access, a 10 MB file will take well over 20 minutes even under the best conditions.
6. Is the file searchable? Budgets sometimes run into the hundreds of pages. If the file simply consists of scanned images of the paper version and does not offer the ability to search the text, this presents a considerable hurdle to obtaining information quickly.
7. How easily is the budget located? Question responses accounted for the number of clicks from the government's home page to the budget document. Thus, lower numbers are better.

In addition to the actual budget document, another critical piece of information is a government's comprehensive annual financial report (CAFR). CAFRs provide detailed information about a gov-

TABLE I BUDGETS

ENTITY	2009	PREVIOUS	R/E PIE	FORMAT	< 10 MB	SEARCHABLE	EASE OF LOCATION
MARYLAND	■	2008-2004	■	PDF	●	■	1
ALLEGANY	■	2008-2000	■	PDF	●	■	1
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	2008-2006	●	PDF	■	■	2
BALTIMORE	■	2008-2006	■	PDF	■	■	3
BALTIMORE CITY	■	2008-2006	■	PDF	■	■	3
CALVERT	■	●	■	PDF	■	■	3
CAROLINE	●	2008	●	PDF	■	●	2
CARROLL	■	2008-2004	●	PDF	■	■	1
CECIL	■	2008-2007	■	PDF	■	■	2
CHARLES	■	2008-2006	●	PDF	■	■	2
DORCHESTER	■	2008-2006	●	PDF	■	■	3
FREDERICK	■	2008-2006	●	PDF	■	●	3
GARRETT	■	2008-2007	■	PDF	■	■	2
HARFORD	■	2008	■	PDF	■	■	2
HOWARD	■	2008-2007	■	PDF	●	■	1
KENT	●	2007	■	HTML	■	■	2
MONTGOMERY	■	2008-2005	■	PDF	■	■	2
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	2008-2003	■	PDF	■	●	3
QUEEN ANNE'S	■	●	●	PDF	■	●	3
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	■	2008-2004	●	PDF	■	■	2
TALBOT	■	2008	■	PDF	■	■	2
WASHINGTON	●	2008-2004	■	PDF	■	■	2
WICOMICO	■	●*	■	PDF	■	■	3
WORCHESTER	●	2008	●	PDF	■	●	2

\* Furthermore, the link for the FY 2009 budget is broken and must be corrected by the user.

Note: For all tables ■ denotes available while ● denotes unavailable. For more detailed specifics, consult Appendix on page 16.

ernment's finances, along with explanations provided by financial officers. They are also reviewed for accuracy by independent auditors. Table 2 presents an evaluation of CAFR transparency for Maryland's state government and 23 counties. Evaluation of CAFR transparency used the same criteria as evaluating budget transparency, with the following exceptions:

1. CAFRs are produced at the completion of a fiscal year, and typically take several months to assemble. This means that in July and August of 2008, the most recent CAFRs available would be for FY 2007. FY 2008 CAFRs are likely to become available in late 2008 to early 2009.
2. Revenue and expense charts are not included in CAFRs, which have a standard format.

Expenditures on education make up nearly half of most counties' budgets. In addition to the primary government, public school systems, which are component units of county governments, are also required to produce their own budgets and CAFRs. Tables 3 and 4 present evaluations of the budget and CAFR transparency for the public school systems of Maryland's 23 counties and Baltimore City, using similar criteria to the evaluations above.

## CONTRACTS

Transparency in government contracts is particularly important because of the potential for favoritism, waste, abuse, and fraud in this area. While perhaps the majority of procurement decisions are diligently executed, there is always a possibility of political influence in the awarding of a contract.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the more informa-

**TABLE 2 COMPREHENSIVE ANNUAL FINANCIAL REPORTS (CAFRS)**

ENTITY	2007	PREVIOUS	FORMAT	< 10 MB	SEARCHABLE	EASE OF LOCATION
MARYLAND	■	2006-1997	PDF	■	■	4
ALLEGANY	■	2006-1999	PDF	■	●	4
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	2006-2004	PDF	■	■	4
BALTIMORE	■	2006-2005	PDF	■	■	4
BALTIMORE CITY	■	2006-2000	PDF	■	■	4
CALVERT	■	●	PDF	■	●	3
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●	●	●
CARROLL	■	2006-2005	PDF	●	●	3
CECIL	■	2006	PDF	●	●	3
CHARLES	■	2006-2002	PDF	●	●	2
DORCHESTER	■	2006-2003	PDF	■	■	3
FREDERICK	■	2006-2004	PDF	■	●	6
GARRETT	●	●	●	●	●	●
HARFORD	●	●	●	●	●	●
HOWARD	■	2006-2005	PDF	■	■	4
KENT	●	●	●	●	●	●
MONTGOMERY	■	2006-2001	PDF	●	■	4
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	2006-2002	PDF	●	●	5
QUEEN ANNE'S	■	●	PDF	■	■	3
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	■	2006-2004	PDF	■	■	3
TALBOT	■	●	PDF	■	■	3
WASHINGTON	■	2006-2003	PDF	■	■	2
WICOMICO	■	●	●	●	●	●
WORCESTER	■	●	PDF	■	●	2

tion regarding bids and contracts that is publicly available, the better.

Table 5 presents an evaluation of contract transparency for Maryland's state government and 23 counties. Evaluating contract transparency is complex because of the number of documents involved. The normal procurement process may involve a request for proposal (RFP) with several addenda, a list of bidders, a list of bids, a list of awardees, and so on. The following criteria were used:

1. Are the rules governing bidding and contracts available online?
2. Are pending requests for proposal (RFPs), invitations for bids (IFBs), etc. available online?
3. Is information on current bidders and bids available online?
4. Is information on current awardees available online?
5. Is the full text of current contracts available online?
6. Is information on previous bidders and bids available online?
7. Is information on previous awardees available online?
8. Does the entity maintain a comprehensive list of vendors online?
9. What is the minimum amount that triggers a competitive bid procedure?

Sunshine Review's transparency checklist also suggested searching for the full text of previous contracts and noting if vendor campaign contributions are disclosed along with bids and awards; however, none of the government websites examined had either of these details, so they have not been included in the list of criteria.

TABLE 3 PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM BUDGETS

ENTITY	2009	PREVIOUS	FORMAT	< 10 MB	SEARCHABLE
ALLEGANY	●	2008-2007	PDF	■	■
ANNE ARUNDEL	●	2008-2005	PDF	■	■
BALTIMORE	■	2008-2003	PDF	●	■
BALTIMORE CITY	●	2008	PDF	■	■
CALVERT	■	●	PDF	■	■
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●	●
CARROLL	●	●*	●	●	●
CECIL	■	2008-2007	PDF	■	■
CHARLES	■	●	PDF	■	■
DORCHESTER	●	2008-2007**	PDF	■	●
FREDERICK	■	2008	PDF	■	■
GARRETT	●	●	●	●	●
HARFORD	■	2008	PDF	■	■
HOWARD	■	2008	PDF	■	■
KENT	●	●	●	●	●
MONTGOMERY	■	2008-2003	PDF	●	PARTIALLY
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	2008-2005	PDF	■	■
QUEEN ANNE'S	■**	●	PDF	■	■
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	■**	●	PDF	■	■
TALBOT	●	●	●	●	●
WASHINGTON	■	●	PDF	■	■
WICOMICO	■	●	PDF	●	●
WORCESTER	●	●	●	●	●

\*The FY 2008 budget is listed, but the link is broken.

\*\*The budget cannot be found via a link; you must search for it on the BoardDocs site.

Once again, because of the large portion of a county's budget that education expenditures represent, this study includes evaluation of the transparency of the various public school systems' contracts. Table 6 presents an evaluation of contract transparency for Maryland's public school systems. The criteria used are similar to those explained above, although they do not include a search for either the full text of contracts or information on historical contracts.

It is quite evident that most bid and contract information is provided with the intent to inform potential vendors of bidding opportunities, rather than to inform members of the public about the bidding process. This explains the preponderance of governments that offer RFPs and IFBs online, but do not offer information on received bids or contract awards. This also shows that it is technically feasible for these governments to provide information about bids and contracts online, but that for whatever reason, they choose not to. Although it may be convenient to do so, governments should avoid relying on third-

party bid and contract systems that do not allow for public access to the bid and contract information—specifically—Baltimore City's use of CitiBuy and the Baltimore City Public School System's use of K12Buy.com. In addition to competitive contracts, the transparency of information surrounding the grants that various state agencies and counties award was evaluated. In general, this information is rather difficult to track down. Table 7 presents an evaluation of grant transparency for several state and local government entities. Two items were sought: lists of awardees, and the total amount awarded in the most recent year for which there were data. There are many more grant-giving agencies and governments than are listed here; this list represents only the entities for which definite figures exist.

## MEETINGS

Effective public participation in government necessitates transparent meetings. Table 8 presents an evaluation of meeting transparency for Mary-

**TABLE 4 PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CAFRS**

ENTITY	2007	PREVIOUS	FORMAT	< 10 MB	SEARCHABLE
ALLEGANY	■	2006	PDF	■	●
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	2006-2004	PDF	■	■
BALTIMORE	■	2006-2005	PDF	●	●
BALTIMORE CITY	■	●	PDF	■	■
CALVERT	●	●	●	●	●
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●	●
CARROLL	■	●	PDF	■	■
CECIL	■	2006	PDF	■	■
CHARLES	■	●	PDF	■	●
DORCHESTER	■*	●	PDF	■	●
FREDERICK	■*	●	PDF	■	■
GARRETT	●	●	●	●	●
HARFORD	■	2006	PDF	●	■
HOWARD	■	2006-2004	PDF	■	■
KENT	●	●	●	●	●
MONTGOMERY	■	2006-2003	PDF	■	PARTIALLY
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	●	PDF	■	■
QUEEN ANNE'S	●	●	●	●	●
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	●	●	●	●	●
TALBOT	■	2006	PDF	■	■
WASHINGTON	●	●	●	●	●
WICOMICO	●	●	●	●	●
WORCESTER	●	●	●	●	●

\*The CAFR cannot be found via a link; you must search for it on the BoardDocs site.

land's state government and 23 counties. Transparency in this area is evaluated based on several criteria, not just on which meetings are open to the public:

1. Is a schedule of upcoming meetings provided?
2. Are minutes of meeting posted online?
3. If so, are the minutes provided in a searchable format?
4. Is at least two weeks' notice before a meeting provided?
5. Is a tentative meeting agenda provided?
6. Is the meeting streamed or webcast?

While a few of the governments evaluated in this report offer webcasts of meetings, many more provide cablecasts. Principles of transparency encour-

age both webcasts and cablecasts, but webcasts are particularly important because they do not necessarily rely upon the citizen subscribing to a cable service. Additionally, historical webcasts are easier to archive and retrieve than cablecasts, which are only shown at specific times.

### ELECTED AND ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICIALS

The vast majority of the websites examined contained sufficient contact details for both elected and administrative officials. In cases where the documents required were not available online, the available contact information could always be used to obtain the documents. The results of votes in the General Assembly can be easily found at its website.<sup>7</sup> For local votes held by county councils or county commissioners, the results are typically specified in the minutes of those meetings. Readers should refer back to the Meetings section to determine whether the results of votes would be easily accessible online.

TABLE 5 CONTRACTS

ENTITY	RULES	CURRENT RFPs/IFBS	CURRENT BIDS	CURRENT AWARDEES	CURRENT CONTRACTS	PREVIOUS BIDS	PREVIOUS AWARDEES	VENDOR LIST	MINIMUM VALUE
MARYLAND*	■	■	●	●	■	●	●	●††	UNKNOWN
MARYLAND**	■	■	●	■	■†	●	■	●††	UNKNOWN
ALLEGANY	■	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	\$25,000‡
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	■	\$25,000
BALTIMORE	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	●	\$25,000
BALTIMORE CITY‡‡	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
CALVERT	●	■	■	●	●	■	●	●	\$15,000
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
CARROLL	■	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	\$25,000
CECIL	■	■	●	●	●	●	■	●	\$10,000
CHARLES	■	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	\$25,000
DORCHESTER	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
FREDERICK	■	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	\$30,000
GARRETT	■	■	■	■	●	■	■	■	\$15,000
HARFORD	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	■	\$10,000
HOWARD	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	■	\$30,000
KENT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
MONTGOMERY	■	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
PRINCE GEORGE'S	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
QUEEN ANNE'S	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
SOMERSET	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
ST. MARY'S	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
TALBOT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
WASHINGTON	■	■	■	■	●	●	●	●	\$25,000
WICOMICO	■	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	\$5,000
WORCESTER	●	■	●	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN

\* Department of Budget and Management

\*\* Department of General Services

† Contract text available for statewide master contracts only

†† A vendor list is maintained by the Maryland State Ethics Commission.<sup>4</sup>

‡ "All purchases of used equipment and supplies shall be exempt from the requirements of public bidding."

‡‡ Baltimore City uses a purchasing portal called CitiBuy<sup>5</sup> for which one must have a valid Federal Tax ID. It is unknown what sort of information is available to registered users of the portal.

## LOBBYING AND ETHICS

Most of the governments examined combined information regarding lobbying and ethics into a common area of their websites. For this reason, the report on the transparency of these topics is combined here. Table 9 presents an evaluation of lobbying and ethics transparency for Maryland's state government and 23 counties. Several criteria were examined:

1. Are rules governing lobbying available online?
2. Is a list of registered lobbyists available online?
3. Are lobbyists' compensation and expenditure amounts disclosed online?

4. Are lobbyists' campaign contributions disclosed online?
5. Is an annual report of the ethics commission available online?
6. Are previous annual reports of the ethics commission available online?
7. Are the advisory opinions of the ethics commission available online?

## AUDITS

Audits that evaluate the fiscal compliance and performance of state agencies are conducted by a separate entity within the state government—the

TABLE 6 PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CONTRACTS

ENTITY	RULES	CURRENT RFPs/IFBS	CURRENT BIDS	CURRENT AWARDEES	VENDOR LIST	MINIMUM VALUE
ALLEGANY	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	■	■	■	●	\$25,000
BALTIMORE	■	■	■	■	●	\$25,000
BALTIMORE CITY*	■	■	●	●	●	\$25,000
CALVERT	■	●	●	●	●	\$25,000
CAROLINE	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
CARROLL	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
CECIL	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
CHARLES	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
DORCHESTER	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
FREDERICK	■	■	●	●**	●	\$15,000
GARRETT	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
HARFORD	■	■	●	■	●	\$25,000
HOWARD	■	■	●	●	●	\$25,000
KENT	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
MONTGOMERY	■	■	●	●†	■	\$25,000
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	■	●	●††	●	UNKNOWN
QUEEN ANNE'S	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
ST. MARY'S	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
TALBOT	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
WASHINGTON	■	■	■	●	●	\$15,000
WICOMICO	●	■	●	●	●	UNKNOWN
WORCESTER	●	●	●	●	●	UNKNOWN

\*The Baltimore City Public School System uses K12Buy.com<sup>6</sup> for bidding, which requires a login and is not publicly accessible.

\*\* Awards are related in minutes of the Board of Education meetings, but are not easily found.

† Interested parties are instructed to e-mail for bid results.

†† The "Awards" page is said to be under construction.

Office of Legislative Audits (OLA) —which is part of the Department of Legislative Services. The OLA performs regular audits of state agencies for fiscal compliance, typically on a three to four year basis. Performance audits are conducted irregularly, either by legislative direction or at the discretion of the Legislative Auditor. Additionally, most state agencies produce an annual report documenting their activities in varying detail. Table 10 presents an evaluation of audit and annual report transparency for Maryland's 20 executive departments. To evaluate transparency in this area, Maryland's 20 executive departments were examined to determine the year of the latest fiscal compliance audit, and the year of the latest annual report.

Note that in addition to the 20 executive departments listed above, there are a great number of independent agencies, as well as colleges and universities and agencies within the judicial branch, which are also audited by the OLA. Furthermore,

since 2005, the OLA has been auditing the financial management practices of Maryland's local school systems. Currently these audits are about one-half completed, and are due to be finished by 2010. Table 11 notes which local school systems have been audited, and the year of the audit.

## TAXES

Transparency in tax information can be difficult to evaluate, but for the purposes of this report, it was evaluated based on whether a local government has clearly declared its various tax rates (e.g., for property, hotels, etc.) online. Note that most county government information is rather paltry, and typically only includes real property tax rates. Most tax information at the state level is either maintained at the Comptroller of Maryland's website,<sup>8</sup> or at the website of the State Department of Assessments and Taxation<sup>9</sup> (SDAT). Sunshine Review suggests evaluating whether governments provide information

**TABLE 7 GRANTS**

ENTITY	AWARDEES	TOTAL
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	■	\$5,929,339
MARYLAND STATE ARTS COUNCIL		
ARTS IN COMMUNITIES	■	\$6,550
ARTVANTAGE GRANTS	■	\$85,175
COMMUNITY ARTS DEVELOPMENT - TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	■	\$2,000
COMMUNITY ARTS DEVELOPMENT NEA/CHALLENGE AMERICA	■	\$9,250
GRANTS FOR ORGANIZATIONS	■	\$12,879,782
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR GRANTS FOR ORGANIZATIONS	■	\$5,900
MARYLAND TRADITIONS PROJECT GRANT	■	\$30,000
TECHNOLOGY ENHANCEMENT GRANTS	■	\$73,919*
INDIVIDUAL ARTISTS AWARDS	■	\$250,000
MARYLAND TRADITIONS APPRENTICESHIP AWARDS	■	\$20,000**
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT		
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM	■	\$5,171,482
MARYLAND TOWN MANAGER CIRCUIT RIDER GRANT PROGRAM	●	\$125,000
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GRANTS PROGRAM	●	\$200,000
MARYLAND AFFORDABLE HOUSING TRUST	■	\$4,613,585
ANNE ARUNDEL	●	\$2,437,000
HOWARD COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICE PARTNERSHIPS	■	\$4,779,074
MONTGOMERY	■	\$11,722,617

\* Figure from 2005; grants awarded every other year; 2007 figure not available.  
 \*\* Maximum, but total may be less.

on how to appeal property tax assessments, but in Maryland these are always first appealed through the SDAT. Table 12 notes which of Maryland's 23 counties provide tax information online.

**PUBLIC INFORMATION**

Citizens are guaranteed access to public information under the Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA).<sup>10</sup> While MPIA requests can be sent to any appropriate government official, they are typically expedited if sent directly to the individual or office responsible for fulfilling them. In most cases, county governments and state departments have designated public information officials who are responsible for processing and fulfilling these requests.

Table 13 presents an evaluation of public information act transparency for Maryland's 23 counties and 20 executive departments. Transparency regarding the process of requesting public information was evaluated using the following criteria:

1. Is there a clearly labeled webpage regarding MPIA requests?
2. How easily is the webpage located? Responses to this question included the number of clicks

from the government's home page to the webpage.

3. Under the MPIA, fees may be charged for the processing of requests and recovery of information. Are these fees explicitly stated online?
4. Ideally, a standardized form for submitting an MPIA request would be provided.

Despite the importance of the availability of public information, many government officials tend to view public information requests with annoyance. This is somewhat understandable, given the heavy burden that fulfilling the requests can place on small staffs. Often simply e-mailing or calling the relevant official and directly asking for the necessary information can result in faster retrieval than submitting a public information request. Another issue of concern regarding public information requests is the associated fees. Of 11 requests recently filed with various county offices, only one county charged any fees for fulfilling the request.<sup>11</sup> Other requestors, however, have been faced with fees ranging into the tens of thousands of dollars,<sup>12</sup> particularly in response to filing requests

**TABLE 8 MEETINGS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY, COUNTY COUNCIL, OR COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

ENTITY	SCHEDULE	MINUTES	SEARCHABLE	NOTICE	AGENDA	WEBCAST
MARYLAND	■	■	■	■	■	■
ALLEGANY	■	■	■	■	■	■
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	●	●	■	●	●
BALTIMORE	■	■	■	■	■	●
BALTIMORE CITY	■	■	■	■	■	●
CALVERT	■	●	●	●	■	■
CAROLINE	■	■	■	■	■	●
CARROLL	●	●	●	●	■	●
CECIL	■	■	■	■	■	●
CHARLES	●	■	■	●	■	■
DORCHESTER	●	■	■	●	■	●
FREDERICK	■	■	■	■	■	●
GARRETT	●	■	■	■	■	●
HARFORD	■	■	●	■	●	●
HOWARD	■	■	■	■	■	●
KENT	■	■	■	■	■	●
MONTGOMERY	■	■	■	■	■	■
PRINCE GEORGE'S	■	●	●	■	●	●
QUEEN ANNE'S	■	■	■	■	■	■
SOMERSET	■	■	■	■	■	■
ST. MARY'S	●	PARTIAL	■	●	■	■
TALBOT	■	PARTIAL	■	■	■	●
WASHINGTON	■	■	■	■	■	■
WICOMICO	■	■	■	●	■	●
WORCESTER	■	■	■	■	■	●

for electronic information such as e-mails. This is in spite the fact that retrieving electronic information from a properly structured system should be less costly than retrieving physical documents.

**CONCLUSION**

Governments and agencies should strive to present their documents in standard formats that a wide variety of citizens will be able to access. For textual and graphical information, Adobe’s Portable Document Format (PDF) is an excellent choice because viewing software for PDF files is available for practically all modern computer systems. For audio and video, particularly streaming audio and video, the choice of format is more complex, and assuring compatibility with several operating systems can sometimes be prohibitively expensive for small governments and agencies with limited budgets. In this case, formats that serve the widest audience should be chosen, and the information contained in audio and video content should ideally also be presented in textual form for those

citizens who are unable to access the chosen audio or video format.

Additionally, governments and agencies should seek to ensure that as much textual information as possible is presented in a searchable and machine-readable format. This has two purposes. First, as previously mentioned, since many government documents may be several hundred pages long, the ability to electronically search such documents is critical to ensuring speedy access to public information without requiring an undue amount of effort. Second, machine-readability ensures that electronic information can be accessed by screen-reading software for visually impaired users. Non-machine-readable documents, such as pages from a budget or report that have simply been scanned and saved as images, present both ease of use and accessibility problems.

Unnecessary restrictions should not be placed on documents. For example, although Montgomery County’s Comprehensive Annual Financial report is provided as a searchable PDF file, the creator of the document chose to try to prevent readers from copy-

TABLE 9 LOBBYING AND ETHICS

ENTITY	RULES	LOBBYIST LIST	COMPENSATION & EXPENDITURES	CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS	ANNUAL REPORT	PREVIOUS REPORTS	ADVISORY OPINIONS
MARYLAND	■	■	■	■	■	2006-2002	■
ALLEGANY	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	■	■	●	■	2006-2002	■
BALTIMORE	■	●	●	●	●	●	●
BALTIMORE CITY	■	●	●	●	●	●	●
CALVERT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CARROLL	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CECIL	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CHARLES	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
DORCHESTER	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
FREDERICK	■	■	●	●	●	●	■
GARRETT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
HARFORD	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
HOWARD	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
KENT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
MONTGOMERY	■	■	■	■	■	2006-1998	■
PRINCE GEORGE'S	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
QUEEN ANNE'S	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	■	●	●	●	●	2005	■
TALBOT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
WASHINGTON	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
WICOMICO	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
WORCESTER	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

ing or extracting information from the document by means of digital security features. This choice was doubly counterproductive: first, it temporarily prevented the ability to excerpt a few relevant paragraphs from this 117-page document, and second, the restriction was quickly defeated by simply taking a screen capture of the relevant paragraphs.

Government and agency websites should be clearly and consistently designed. Many of the websites accessed in preparing this report are guilty on this count. Some appear to have been neglected for several months at a time, and often they do not contain the most up-to-date versions of annual reports, even months after those reports have been published. Several links to important documents were broken. Website search functionality is also critical. Several of the websites accessed do not include any means of searching the site. On the other hand, the inclusion of search functionality is not an excuse for lack of proper website design. Often times, the only way to access important documents was after sev-

eral search attempts. Important information should always be linked from the home page in a logical manner. These design issues are fairly simple, and if a government or agency does not have the resources to maintain a website in-house, creative solutions, such as obtaining high-school student volunteers to update the website, might be appropriate.

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1 Accessed at <http://sunshinereview.org/>.  
 2 Accessed at [http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Transparency\\_Checklist](http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Transparency_Checklist).  
 3 See for example the questions surrounding Prince George's County Executive Jack Johnson: "Prince George's County Executive Aids Friends," *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 2006: A01.  
 4 Accessed at <http://ethics.gov.state.md.us/>.  
 5 Accessed at <https://www.baltimorecitybuy.org/bso/login.jsp>.  
 6 Accessed at <http://www.k12buy.com/>.  
 7 Accessed at <http://mlis.state.md.us/>.  
 8 Accessed at <http://www.comp.state.md.us/>.  
 9 Accessed at <http://www.dat.state.md.us/>.  
 10 For further information, see the *Maryland Attorney General's Public Information Act Manual*, accessible at <http://www.oag.state.md.us/Opengov/pia.htm>.  
 11 St. Mary's County charged a duplication fee of \$0.25 per page, resulting in total charges of \$6.50.  
 12 "The Digital Divide," *Southern Maryland Newspapers Online*, July 11, 2008.

**TABLE 10 AUDITS AND ANNUAL REPORTS FOR MARYLAND'S EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS**

ENTITY	FISCAL AUDIT	ANNUAL REPORT
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGING	2008	2007
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE*	2007	2006
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF BUDGET & MANAGEMENT*	2006	2009
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	2005	2007
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES	2007	2007
MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	2006	2008
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT	2008	2004
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL SERVICES*	2008	2007
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & MENTAL HYGIENE*	2007	2007
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT*	2006	2005-2009
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES*	2007	2006
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY	●**	2010
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE SERVICES*	2007	2008
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, LICENSING & REGULATION*	2005	2008
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES*	2008	2006
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING	2008	2007
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY & CORRECTIONAL SERVICES*	2007	2006
MARYLAND STATE POLICE	2007	2006
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION*	2006	2008-2013
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	2007	●

\*The department has subdivisions, but only audits of the Office of the Secretary are linked.

\*\*The Department of Information Technology was created in 2008, so no audits have been conducted yet.

**TABLE 11 AUDITS OF LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS**

ENTITY	YEAR	ENTITY	YEAR
ALLEGANY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007	KENT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007
ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007	PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2006
BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2006	QUEEN ANNE'S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2006
CARROLL COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007	TALBOT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007
FREDERICK COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2008	WASHINGTON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2007
HARFORD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	2008		

**TABLE 12 TAX RATE INFORMATION**

ENTITY	TAX RATES	ENTITY	TAX RATES
ALLEGANY	■	HARFORD	■
ANNE ARUNDEL	●	HOWARD	■
BALTIMORE	■	KENT	■
BALTIMORE CITY	●	MONTGOMERY	■
CALVERT	■	PRINCE GEORGE'S	●
CAROLINE	●	QUEEN ANNE'S	●
CARROLL	■	SOMERSET	●
CECIL	■	ST. MARY'S	■
CHARLES	●	TALBOT	●
DORCHESTER	●	WASHINGTON	■
FREDERICK	■	WICOMICO	■
GARRETT	●	WORCESTER	■

TABLE 13 MARYLAND PUBLIC INFORMATION ACT

ENTITY	LABELED	EASE OF LOCATION	FEES	FORM
ALLEGANY	■	1	■	■
ANNE ARUNDEL	■	2	●	■
BALTIMORE	●	●	●	●
BALTIMORE CITY	●	●	●	●
CALVERT	●	●	●	●
CAROLINE	●	●	●	●
CARROLL	■*	2	●	●
CECIL	■**	2	■	■
CHARLES	■*	1	●	●
DORCHESTER	■**	2	■	■
FREDERICK	●	●	●	●
GARRETT	■	1	●	■
HARFORD	●	●	●	●
HOWARD	■*	3	●	●
KENT	●	●	●	●
MONTGOMERY	■	2	●	●
PRINCE GEORGE'S	●	●	●	●
QUEEN ANNE'S	■*	1	●	●
SOMERSET	●	●	●	●
ST. MARY'S	■**	2	●	■
TALBOT	●	●	●	●
WASHINGTON	■	2	●	●
WICOMICO	■*	1	●	●
WORCESTER	■*	1	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGING	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	■*	1	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF BUDGET & MANAGEMENT	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT	■	1	■	■
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL SERVICES	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & MENTAL HYGIENE	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF JUVENILE SERVICES	■*	1	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, LICENSING & REGULATION	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES	■	†	■	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING	■*	3	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY & CORRECTIONAL SERVICES	■	1	■	■
MARYLAND STATE POLICE	■	†	■	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	●	●	●	●
MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	●	●	●	●

\* Details for the Office of Public Information are provided, but no mention of the MPIA is made.

\*\* A form is provided, but it is not clearly distinguishable from other documents.

† Indicates webpage was found through a search.

## APPENDIX

In general, throughout the document, the symbols are as follows:

■ = available ● = unavailable

(Note: Additional information appears in italics)

A red square ■ generally denotes a positive and a black circle ● generally denotes a negative. When a field does not contain yes/no data and a black circle appears, it means the data were unavailable (either they do not exist or could not be found). Example: Table 1 (Budgets), in the “Ease of Location” column. This normally contains a number, except for Somerset County, which contains a black circle, meaning the data could not be found.

### KEY TO TABLES

#### TABLE 1 – BUDGETS

2009: ■ ●

PREVIOUS: ●

R/E PIE: ■ (both pie charts exist), ● (zero or one pie chart only)

FORMAT: ●

<10 MB: ■ (less than 10 MB), ● (over 10 MB or unavailable)

SEARCHABLE: ■ (searchable), ● (not searchable or unavailable)

EASE OF LOCATION: ●

#### TABLE 2 – CAFRS

2007: ■ ●

PREVIOUS: ●

FORMAT: ●

<10 MB: ■ (less than 10 MB), ● (over 10 MB or unavailable)

SEARCHABLE: ■ = (searchable), ● (not searchable or unavailable)

EASE OF LOCATION: ●

#### TABLE 3 – PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM BUDGETS

Same as Table 1, only doesn’t include the R/E Pie column or Ease of Location column

#### TABLE 4 – PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CAFRS

Same as Table 2, only doesn’t include the Ease of Location column

#### TABLE 5 – CONTRACTS

RULES: ■ (list of rules available), ● (no list available)

CURRENT RFPs/IFBs: ■ (current RFPs and IFBs available), ● (none available)

CURRENT BIDS: ■ ●

CURRENT AWARDEES: ■ ●

CURRENT CONTRACTS: ■ ●

PREVIOUS BIDS: ■ ●

PREVIOUS AWARDEES: ■ ●

VENDOR LIST: ■ ●

#### TABLE 6 – PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM CONTRACTS

Same as Table 5, only doesn’t include “Current Contracts”, “Previous Bids”, or “Previous Awardees” columns.

#### TABLE 7 – GRANTS

AWARDEES: ■ ●

#### TABLE 8 – MEETINGS

SCHEDULE: ■ ●

MINUTES: ■ ●

SEARCHABLE: ■ (searchable), ● (not searchable or unavailable)

NOTICE: ■ (posted at least two weeks in advance),

● (posted less than two weeks in advance or unavailable)

AGENDA: ■ ●

WEBCAST: ■ ●

#### TABLE 9 – LOBBYING AND ETHICS

RULES: ■ ●

LOBBYIST LIST: ■ ●

COMPENSATION AND EXPENDITURES: ■ ●

CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS: ■ ●

ANNUAL REPORT: ■ ●

PREVIOUS REPORTS: ●

ADVISORY OPINIONS: ■ ●

#### TABLE 10 – AUDITS AND ANNUAL REPORTS

FISCAL AUDIT: ●

ANNUAL REPORT: ●

#### TABLE 11 – N/A

#### TABLE 12 – MARYLAND PUBLIC INFORMATION ACT

LABELED: ■ (clearly labeled webpage),

● (not clearly labeled or non-existent webpage)

EASE OF LOCATION: ●

FEES: ■ ●

FORM: ■ ●

#### TABLE 13 – TAX RATE INFORMATION

TAX RATES: ■ ●

## ABOUT THE MARYLAND PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Founded in 2001, the Maryland Public Policy Institute is a nonpartisan public policy research and education organization that focuses on state policy issues. Our goal is to provide accurate and timely research analysis of Maryland policy issues and market these findings to key primary audiences.

The mission of the Maryland Public Policy Institute is to formulate and promote public policies at all levels of government based on principles of free enterprise, limited government, and civil society.

In order to maintain objectivity and independence, the Institute accepts no government funding and does not perform contract research. The Maryland Public Policy Institute is recognized as a 501 (C) (3) research and education organization under the Internal Revenue Code.

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