



Most local budgets are just a few clicks away

Most localities and school divisions provide online access to budgets – if you can find them

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We are in the midst of local government budget season in Virginia, with school divisions and localities presenting proposed 2013-14 spending plans and holding public forums and hearings on them.

If you want to explore the proposed budget, and compare it to the current spending plan, where do you go?

According to open government advocates, scholars and citizens, you should not have to go anywhere. From your home or office computer, or even your cell phone or tablet, you should be able to find those budgets on the locality or school division website.

"There is no excuse for anyone not to be able to go on a city or county website and not find the current budget," said Christopher Newport University political science professor Quentin Kidd, who also directs the university's Wason Center for Public Policy. "Ultimately it is our money the government is spending."

How hard do you have to work to find those budgets?

The Virginia Coalition for Open Government recently tackled that problem with the help of CNU students.

The resulting report, "How Many Clicks to Get to Your Budget," focused on cities and counties, but the same question could be asked of school divisions, which spend millions of federal, state and local tax dollars.

The report notes in its introduction, "Without the budget, there's nothing else."

College of William and Mary law school professor Jim Heller agrees.

Citizens need access to budgets so they can "look at where local money is spent, such as the amount going to police and fire departments," Heller said.

One of the guiding questions for the coalition researchers was, "If a citizen didn't know exactly how the government is structured, how easy is it to navigate the clicks" through the website to find the budget?

Coalition Executive Director Megan Rhyne said the group also looked for complete budgets in addition to budget summaries. The research team ultimately used 10 questions to weigh their results.

"We saw plenty of budget summaries," she said. "Or we saw budgets that were lists of numbers. ... We measured each of these factors and gave more credit to the ones that had both summaries and the full budget. We also gave credit to those that were searchable."

Rhyne said the research team was surprised to find that the relative wealth of a community was not a predictor for ease of access or budget readability. But the size of a community appeared to affect its website and whether budgets were available.

"The smallest communities were the worst," she said. "They didn't have anything. The rest were a mixed bag."

Most Peninsula-area communities earned Bs in the study. James City and York counties both received A grades. Gloucester and Surry counties, and Hampton, Newport News and Poquoson earned solid Bs, while Mathews County and Williamsburg received B-minuses. Isle of Wight County received a C.

James City and York were among those with clear links and the word "budget" easy to find on their home pages. But while Williamsburg earned a B-minus, Rhyne said the city offers a "real time dashboard that tells you how much money is spent all the time." York has devoted a webpage to its fiscal year 2014 proposed budget.

Several localities and school divisions also provide annual reports and approved budgets from prior years, some going back 10 years or more.

That is in line with Kidd's views on what should be available on a government website: "You should be able to find anything about budgets that have been approved and about how a local government has said it wants to spend your money. ... All of that should be clearly visible."

Click your way to the budget

Here's how to find your locality's or school division's budget. Some show two numbers: one to reach the proposed FY2014 budget page and one to reach the current budget page.

Gloucester County, 2

Click link to FY2014 budget on main page, click on budget link.

Listed budgets go back to FY2002

Gloucester County Public Schools, 3

Proposed FY2014 budget link on main page.

For FY2013 budget, use department menu and click on budget link, then on budget.

Only FY2012 listed.

Hampton, 3

Use city department menu and find and click on budget office link; click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2003

Hampton City Schools, 3

Use department menu and choose business and finance link, click on budget link, then on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2009.

Isle of Wight County, 2

Click link on main page, then on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2007

Isle of Wight County Schools, 2, 3

Link to FY2014 presentation on main page.

For FY2013, use department menu and choose finance. Click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2009

James City County, 2

Click link on budget link on main page, then on budget.

FY2012 and FY2013-14 budgets listed.

Mathews County, 3

Use department menu and choose finance, then choose budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2004; also have salary lists back to FY2005

Mathews County Public Schools

No link to budget on website

Newport News, 2, 4

Click link to FY2014 budget presentation on main page.

To reach FY2013 budget, use department menu; choose budget; click on link to website, then choose budgets. Click on budget.

Listed budget go back to FY2005

Newport News Public Schools, 2

Click link to FY2014 information on main page, then click on budget.

Listed on budget page go back to FY2005

Poquoson, 3

Enter "budget" in search box.

Click financial reports in search results.

Click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2000.

Poquoson City Public Schools, 3

Use the About PCPS menu and click on finance, then on the budget link.

Listed budgets go back to FY2010.

Surry County, 2

Use city government menu and choose budget/audit reports link. Click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2009.

Surry County Schools, 2

Use department menu and choose finance. Click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2009.

Williamsburg, 3

Use inside the city menu and click mayor and city council link. Click budget link to reach budgets, then click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2007.

Williamsburg-James City County Schools, 2

Use WJCC budget link on main page. Click on budget.

Listed budgets go back to FY2010.

York County, 1

Click link to budget on main page.

FY2013 budget listed.

York County School Division, 2, 3

Click link to proposed FY2014 budget on main page, then click budget.

For FY2013 budget, use the "about us" menu, click on budgets.

Listed budgets go back to FY2003.

Sources: localities' and school divisions' websites

To read the "How Many Clicks" report, visit the Coalition for Open Government website, <http://www.opengovva.org>.

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