Written by By Dee Hall
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Recently the City of Burlington made some changes to its website, adding a feature it calls a "performance dashboard."

The online tool gives city residents a better look – much of it in real time – about what their government is doing. As the site explains, "Users can review monthly and yearly revenue, expenditures, per capita spending and performance measurements across several departments."

In unveiling the site, Burlington Mayor Robert Miller said, "It has been one of my goals that we make city government as transparent as possible."

That's the kind of thing that makes advocates of open government want to stand up and clap.

City and state officials and politicians sometimes take the jaundiced view that what they do is their business – and resist sharing the information that forms the path for their actions with citizens and taxpayers.

But it's not "their" business, it's the public's business. The public has every right – within established guidelines and reason – to know the details of government operations. Clearly within this realm is information about how much government costs, how well its decisions stack up against other communities, and what alternatives might be available.

Transparency in government is more than a buzzword, it's an effective way of communicating with constituents and taxpayers and building trust. Responsible government officials want to

make sure their decisions can be fully scrutinized and the people making them can be held accountable.

Too often citizens and media representatives around the state have to leap over hurdles to get information on government actions that should be routinely made available for inspection. That means filing formal information requests and sometimes having to go to court before the requested records are finally made public.

Going to court is never a preferred option. It's a cumbersome and expensive process that could often be sidestepped if government officials would simply recognize that Wisconsin's Open Records and Open Meetings laws require that government should operate as openly as possible.

In some cases, public officials and politicians block access to information knowing that by the time the information finally comes out it will be long past the time it is relevant to the issue that made its public release important.

That's hardly good governance.

Mayor Miller and the city of Burlington's online initiative stand in stark contrast to those efforts to keep the public in the dark. The city's new performance dashboard lets Burlington residents (and anyone else) get monthly updates of the city's general fund revenues and expenditures, for both the current and prior year. Taxpayers can compare the cost of city operations to those of other communities and find details on operation spending.

According to Miller, city department heads and the city council use these same online tools to gauge their spending, develop budgets, monitor performance and make policy choices.

Future plans call for the city of Burlington to stream city council meetings on its website live – and create archives of previous meetings.

All these things should provide Burlington residents with a better window into what their government is doing, the choices and reasons for policies and a more open community discussion of the path the city should take.

That's opening the window for better government and more community understanding. And it's something that communities around the state may want to emulate.

Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, a non-profit group dedicated to open government. Steve Lovejoy, a council member, is editor emeritus at the Racine Journal Times.