



Healthy democracies need transparency, accountability

By Jim Hart

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We are at an important crossroads. Our federal government is in search of a solution to a troubled global economy, and our state wrestles with a sour marketplace, which has been generating steadily declining tax revenues.

What are we to do? We should engage in healthy debate over the options before us. Some wish to raise taxes; some wish to infuse our economy with government-backed stimulus spending; some wish to cut spending; some wish to borrow. Let us contemplate our options, make sure they are reconciled with our principles, and proceed with the best course of action.

However, the less obvious — but potentially more serious — crisis is the one over the transparency and accountability of our government. I continue to read disheartening reports about a lack of safeguards and requirements in the midst of unprecedented outlays of government money. I applaud those lawmakers who have advocated for a more thorough accounting of these so-called emergency uses of public money, though I am afraid not enough has been done.

The climate of alarm and urgency is undoubtedly inclining some to relax expectations for governmental transparency. Instead, we should take today's setting as an opportunity to update how governments do business.

Our state and federal governments authorize the spending of countless pots of money each year, often with little public knowledge or oversight. Other states have proposed legislation that would enlist modern technology to provide a Web portal for any taxpayer to access an up-to-the-minute accounting of how their government is spending taxpayer money. Such an idea could serve Florida well.

We are truly blessed to live in a free nation with open and democratic elections, yet we too often seem to stop paying attention once we place our elected officials in office. We cannot let any crisis cause us to cede the reins of accountability. It is not because of suspicion of wrongdoing that such oversight should be enacted, but rather because we know that the best government is one that functions without misgivings or second-guessing.

We should do everything we can to build and protect public trust. Key to that is encouraging average citizens to take a look at the functions and funding of government and advocate for changes that make our tax dollars work more efficiently and in line with their intended purpose.

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