

Searching for answers

Vt. group helps public understand complicated state budget process

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BENNINGTON — Confusion, contends Paul Cillo, is the great barrier preventing citizens from becoming more involved in their state government.

To address that problem, Cillo, a former state representative, serves as president and executive director of the Montpelier-based Public Assets Institute, which was founded in 2003. The independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan institute's goal is to conduct research and disseminate information and analytical reports across the populace.

Cillo and the organization's senior policy analyst, Jack Hoffman, have embarked on a tour of the state to inform people about the institute and what it offers. Cillo said in an interview here Friday that one of the organization's main objectives is to make state budget information more accessible to the public, the news media, advocates and government officials.

"Our basic thought is that there's a lot of information available," Cillo said. "In a way, there's too much to make sense of any of it."

Cillo said the institute is planning to launch an independent Web site next year to help people understand the intricacies of the process.

"We're trying to put the budget into a form that people can understand," Cillo said. "It will be a total separate Web site that draws on state data."

Cillo said getting the answers to even the simplest questions can be a problem, even for those who have familiarity with the budget process.

"If, for example, you just want to know how much the budget grew, there's no one answer," Cillo said. "The administration and the joint fiscal office calculate things differently."

Cillo said these multiple answers to simple questions can turn people off to participation.

"None of this is in black and white, and I think it does a disservice to the public," Cillo said. "If different newspapers are giving the public different budget numbers because one went to the administration and one went to the joint fiscal office, we have a problem."

Cillo said his organization is looking to develop a way to give people clear answers to their questions.

"We want the information to be credible, timely and accessible," Cillo said.

Hoffman, who covered state government for as a reporter for more than two decades, said providing one process for determining the numbers may spur the state government to simplify its process.

"It used to be that the Legislature had one revenue estimate and the administration had another," Hoffman said. "Finally, they came together and agreed it should be one number. We're hoping, in the course of our discussion (with the state) we can get everyone to agree on one number."

Hoffman said the state budget could benefit from further transparency, especially given the fact that substantial cuts are being made this year.

"The administration is going to unveil these cuts on Tuesday," Hoffman said. "What we're encouraging the legislature to do is at least invite public discussion about the cuts."

Hoffman said he felt alternatives to cutting services should be explored.

"It's been a limited discussion — the only thing that's been talked about is cuts," Hoffman said. "We could raise taxes, and Vermont does have rainy-day funds."

Cillo said a two-cent-per-gallon increase in the gas tax could make up for one of the cuts, \$8 million from the transportation budget.

"In a state where gas prices have fluctuated 25 cents in the past month, what does two cents matter?" Cillo said.

Cillo said the cut would likely result in deferred maintenance to the state's road system.

"In the bigger picture, what kind of state do we want to be in five or ten years?" Hoffman said. "We're not having that conversation. I'm betting most Vermonters don't want to see their roads continue to deteriorate."

For additional information about the institute, visit its Web site at www.publicassets.org.