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Internet access to records vital

We would like to add our voice to the chorus of government watchdogs calling for easy Internet access to public documents regarding how taxpayer money is spent on hurricane recovery and reconstruction.

In a recent letter to President Bush, a coalition of watchdog groups asked the president to "post on the Internet copies of every contract, requisition, task/delivery order, agreement or other authorization for spending on Hurricane Katrina relief and reconstruction as soon as contracts are signed, checks are approved and money is disbursed. For such spending that has already occurred, we urge you to direct agencies to put such information online as soon as possible."

The coalition of watchdog groups behind the letter includes the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Center for American Progress, Common Cause, the Federation of American Scientists and the Project on Government Oversight, among others.

We can make no better case for easy Internet access to public records regarding the recovery and rebuilding than the authors of the letter make in this passage:

"Posting vital spending documents online would help the government and taxpayers alike in several ways. Public disclosure will speed the government's ability to track down and stop abuses. Disclosure will inform public debate about the government's response to Hurricane Katrina. In general, public disclosure deters fraud and abuse, so taxpayer dollars may be saved before money is spent. Ultimately, making these documents available online and accessible through a single, searchable Web site saves taxpayer dollars, makes government work better and helps restore the public's trust in the government's ability to perform effectively."

Easy Internet access to government documents related to the recovery should be available not only for work related to Katrina, but Rita as well.

As the letter's authors also point out, existing law requires the federal government to post online any document that can reasonably be expected to have broad public interest. The 1996 amendments to the federal Freedom of Information Act require federal officials to make documents in the government's possession available in an electronic reading room, such as the Internet, if the federal government expects to receive multiple FOIA requests for the document.

Documents related to Katrina and Rita recovery and rebuilding efforts certainly meet that description.

In early October, the Public Affairs Research Council urged state officials to develop a single Web site "to give the public full access to current information on all public recovery funding granted and distributed."

PAR, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group that studies state issues, suggested that such a site should "give the public full access to current information on all public recovery funding granted and distributed. The site should detail the source and use of all recovery funds, enabling the public to track dollars from the federal level to the sub-contractor level. Public bid process information should be provided on this site, including selection criteria, the entities awarding contracts and the individuals with an ownership interest in the applicant companies. Further, the progress of each recovery project should be reported."

After talks with PAR officials, Gov. Kathleen Blanco's administration included an item in her agenda for the special legislative session asking lawmakers to "legislate as to electronic public access to information on disaster recovery funding and contracting."

However, PAR President Jim Brandt and Blanco spokesman Roderick Hawkins said that PAR and the administration have concluded since then that legislation doesn't seem necessary to implement a state Web site for recovery and reconstruction documents.

"We think the governor has the authority to make this happen," said Brandt. Hawkins said the administration is making progress in creating such a Web site.

Since most federal money will be flowing through state coffers before it's spent in affected communities, a state-sponsored Web site could be a useful tool for tracking tax dollars. In cases where federal money goes directly to local communities, the logistics get trickier. Local communities might be unwilling or unable to devote resources to posting documents related to these recovery funds online. If the Bush administration posts federal recovery and rebuilding documents online, there could be some overlap with the information found on a state or community Web site.

We also can see the potential for varying degrees of interpretation at the federal, state and local level about which documents are relevant to recovery and rebuilding. It also is possible that different agencies at different levels of government will move with varying speeds in getting information online.

It would be a good idea for officials at all levels of government to collaborate to make Web sites related to recovery and reconstruction documents easily linked.

We also think the standard should be in favor of posting as much information as possible. But simply placing a document online isn't enough. The Web site should be easy for a layman to navigate.

We hope that federal, state and community officials work together to make easy Internet access to hurricane recovery documents a reality. It would be a useful step in making the work of government open to the taxpayers who foot the bill.