



Analysts: People need better view of state finances

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Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal's pledge to make state government more transparent should include clarifying the state's financial picture for the public, the state's former chief budget analyst said Wednesday.

For example, it is difficult for average people to understand why state government continues to have lingering debt despite the recent budget surpluses, Bob Keaton told Jindal's government and fiscal reform advisory council.

Keaton's recommendation: A "fiscal state of the state report" — similar to a person's credit report — that details state government's liabilities, such as, the \$20 billion price tag for rebuilding the coast and the \$262 million for the most pressing repairs on college and university campuses.

"There's a real reticence to do that because I think it's a scary thing," he told the 47-member advisory council during a meeting at LSU's Kirby Smith Hall.

The council is collecting "good government" ideas for Jindal to use after he takes office in January. During the campaign, the Republican governor-elect touted an action plan that called for reforming government and controlling runaway state spending.

A handful of public policy experts offered suggestions Wednesday on how to increase transparency and accountability in state government.

Jindal did not attend the meeting. He is attending the Republican Governors Association's conference in California.

Barry Erwin, president of the Council for A Better Louisiana, said there are two degrees of transparency in the state Legislature.

The Senate and the House broadcast their chamber proceedings and most of their committee meetings via the Internet. Only the House archives video for later viewing, Erwin noted.

Even the legislative meetings that are videotaped do not always offer the full picture, he said.

The crafting of the state operating budget — the multibillion-dollar bill that funds roads, public hospitals, schools and other services — usually involves behind-the-scenes deal making that results in little scrutiny or debate in front of the public, Erwin said.

Louisiana does well at passing good laws but not at implementing them, said Maurice McTigue, a former ambassador and New Zealand Parliament member now overseeing a government accountability project at George Mason University's Mercatus Center in Arlington, Va.

McTigue testified to the advisory council.

In order to be useful, information must be easily accessible, complete and reliable, he said.

“The worst societies in the world today are the societies that are the most secret,” McTigue said.

In Louisiana, state agencies are required to complete quarterly performance reviews, McTigue noted, but the requirement is unevenly enforced.

He said his researchers stumbled across some 2007 performance reviews in the archived sections of state Web sites purely by accident.

Sometimes just accessing state government Web sites is problematic, said Jennifer Pike, research director for the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana.

As an example she pointed to the Web site that the Blanco administration set up to show how the state is spending federal hurricane recovery funds. The idea is to give people a peephole into the spending of billions of dollars.

The site basically is unusable, Pike said.

She said she tried to access the Web site on several computers.

Every computer locked up when she tried to navigate the administration's Web site, Pike said.