

Wellington opens its books to the world and the web

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Coffee supplies, hotel travel bills, parks association dues. Postal fees and costs for architectural renderings.

Government expenses large and small are now itemized on Wellington's Web site — updated every morning, a feat the village appears to be the first in Florida to achieve.

Only one other municipality in the state, Palm Bay in Brevard County, is known to post detailed financial information — but it updates its site quarterly.

"Open Wellington," as the village's project is named, launched in mid-March and is expected to be complete in early 2011.

When it's done, the public will be able to see not only how much the village paid to particular vendors, but also find contracts or invoices for each expense. Residents also will have click-of-the-mouse access to any documents that don't have privacy-protected information: memos the village manager has sent, communications among staff about projects, letters from residents to the village.

"If you want to see a purchase order, you can see that," village manager Paul Schofield said. "If you want to see a check we wrote, you can see that."

Wellington started pursuing the transparency web feature several years ago to make sure the public never thought the village was hiding anything and to ease residents' access to public records, council members and village staff said.

The village speeded up the project after learning of the Transparency Florida Act, which the state legislature established last year to eventually get governments, school boards and special districts to post all their financial information on-line.

"What is it that we do that we don't want people to see? The answer to that is nothing," Schofield said.

Palm Bay started posting its financial information in December, prompted by the Transparency Florida Act, said the city's deputy city manager, John Lewis.

Open Wellington, which can be accessed through an icon of the same name on www.wellingtonfl.gov, had 313 unique visitors (clicks coming from different computers) in the past two weeks, said Tom Amburgey, Wellington's chief information officer. The entire project is expected to cost no more than \$40,000 to complete.

Viewers can browse by expense type, department, service area, fund or vendor payee. They can sort results alphabetically or by amount. A few clicks show that the clerk's office spent \$33.97 on Oct. 21 at Dunkin Donuts as an office supply expense. And the village manager's office spent \$161 on Nov. 17 at the St. Petersburg Hilton for training and seminars.

Neither the Florida League of Cities nor the Florida Association of Counties keeps track of how many municipalities, counties or special districts post detailed financial information online.

But Wellington is probably a leader in that regard, said Palm Beach County League of Cities Executive Director Jamie Titcomb.

"Most cities at this point seem to be trying to put their minutes and agendas on-line," Titcomb said.

Some of Florida's 410 cities and two of its 67 counties — Lafayette and Union — don't even have fully functioning web sites.

But two counties in the state are leaders in posting other public information, namely e-mails, on-line: Alachua County has provided access to its commissioners' e-mails since 1999, and Martin County has offered access to its commissioners' e-mails since 2003 and to its county administrator's e-mails since 2006.

Wellington plans to start implementing e-mail uploads — communications to anyone on village staff or to council members — toward the end of the project, said Amburgey, who oversees putting the information online.

"We want to make everything in the Wellington world available."

Staff writer Jason Schultz contributed to this story.

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