

# Budget Web site to cost fraction of original \$100M estimate

**SALVADOR RODRIGUEZ**

salvador.rodriquez@azcapitoltimes.com

It looks like Arizona won't have to spend \$100 million to put state budget information online. In fact, not even close.

The cost of the Financial Transparency Web site scheduled to be launched in 2011 is estimated to cost \$740,000, according to a Sept. 1 report by the General Accounting Office. That's less than one-hundredth of what the Department of Administration estimated a year ago during debate on the bill.

State Comptroller Clark Partridge, who runs the General Accounting Office, said he stands by the original estimate. His office was in charge of putting together the figures presented last year as well as last month's report.

"Those numbers came from us and they're factual numbers," Partridge said. "They're not just pie in the sky. To get a system like some of these other states have, it costs about \$100 million."

Partridge said the figures provided to lawmakers last year were based on a combination of possible system upgrades the Web site might eventually need, as well on how much other states spent to create their transparency Web sites.

"Our systems are aging, they do a very good job at what they do, but that technology is aging," he said "Eventually we're going to have to replace that with a newer technology that is going to cost more than certainly what the old system cost."

Former Sen. Tom O'Halleran, a sponsor of the 2008 legislation that called for the creation of the Web site, said he was skeptical from the beginning that it would cost \$100 million, despite testimony from Department of Administration officials that it would, indeed, cost that much.

"This is not designing a new system for Arizona," O'Halleran said. "This is taking what we already have, putting it into a software format that's able to meet the specifications of what information is on a Web page and putting it on a Web page."

O'Halleran said the Web site will be beneficial for Arizonans and members of the Legislature. It's intended to increase government openness by putting state budget information online, which can be viewed by the public.

"Right now, if you're a representative or senator, you have to go through a whole process (to find information)," he said. "Once this is in place, all they have to do is go to the Web page."

However, Rep. Steve Farley said even though the Web site's actual cost will be more affordable than original estimates, it's still too much and there are more important priorities the money could be used for. The Tucson Democrat voted against the legislation last year.

"I'm not sure that there are more than five people in the state of Arizona who'll ever look at this Web site," Farley said. "I'm much more concerned with the quality of the health care for these kids who depend on us, and I'm really concerned with the jobs of the people who've been fired."



Farley said a Web site won't necessarily lead to transparency in government.

"When someone wants to know particular information about particular things, we can look that up and get that to them," he said. "That's something we can do right now without spending three-quarters of a million dollars."

The report by the General Accounting Office said the \$740,000 Web site will be set up on the existing Arizona Financial Information System to avoid creating an entirely new online system. The law that created the Web site did not provide the department with additional money.

"I don't believe we should be voting for unfunded mandates for state agencies when we're cutting their budgets and firing their people at the same time," Farley said. "Money doesn't just come from nowhere. If it's being shifted, what is not being funded because this is?"

Diane Brown, executive director of Arizona Public Interest Research Group, said the Web site will end up saving Arizona more money than it will cost to implement it.

Brown said the Web site could lead to more competitive contracts, more scrutiny on expenditures, more ability for the public to provide input and fewer public information requests, which would free up personnel for other tasks.

"The Web site should save millions of dol-

lars for Arizona taxpayers," she said. "Spending a million dollars or less for financial transparency is a smart investment that, if implemented properly, could reap millions more for government purposes."

Partridge said the biggest challenge facing the Web site is its completion given the limited resources available and the current budget constraints. However, he said the General Accounting Office prepared for this by setting a later implementation date and by bringing up the site in separate phases, with the first one coming on the Web site's launch date.

"Bringing up the site initially will not have all of the information that it will ultimately have, but it will still be tremendously farther than where the state has been historically and it will still consist of a significant portion of the data," he said.

"By using time as our friend and not trying to get it done in a short timeframe, we're able to hopefully work in between all the other competing priorities for the state," he said. "We recognize that transparency is a high priority of the state, and we're committing resources appropriately."


Partridge said budget and staff reductions will affect the Web site.

"What we're trying to do at this point in time is not let what we can't do get in the way of what we can do with the resources that we have," he said. "There are some things that are even in this legislation that we will not be able to provide because we simply don't have the information, such as the geographic location of where the expenditures occurred. But for the most part we can provide most of what is in the legislation, and we will be able to meet, in substance, most of what people were trying to get to."

To ensure the success of the Web site, Brown said it must be user-friendly.

"We want it to be as easy as possible for people to find that information," she said. "A good financial transparency Web site needs to be comprehensive, one-stop and one-click searchable."

Partridge said it is just as important to provide Arizonans with context alongside the data that the Web site will feature.

"I'm a firm believer in transparency ... to the public," he said. "After all, this is their information." 

## CAPITOL QUOTES

"You get more radiation from the banana you ate in the morning than you get from standing beside that ore truck." — Ron Hochstein, president and chief operating officer of Denison, commenting on the danger of hauling uranium ore across tribal lands.

"Under Napolitano they denied them the general permits, and under Brewer they just granted them. It's pretty clear they wanted to get these permits out and there was political pressure to do so."

— Sandy Bahr, of the Sierra Club, commenting on the ADEQ permitting process for uranium mining near the Grand Canyon.



"I am glad the commission took that action because it was the right action to take, and that is the only action that will force my Republican colleagues to come back to a special session."

— Senate Minority Leader Jorge Garcia on the Corporation Commission's decision to close a Tucson office because of funding problems.

"We can't have (Andrew Thomas) do for our state what he's done for our county. The current county governance is in utter shambles and broken, in large measure because of his misbehavior in office."

— Attorney Michael Manning, commenting on one of the reasons he's considering a run for Arizona attorney general.



"Those that we don't have a charge with, if we determine they're illegal, we'll turn them over to ICE. If ICE refuses to take them, then I'll take a little trip to the border and we'll turn them over to let them out." — Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, commenting on the new 287g agreements.

## STAT OF THE WEEK

# 82

The number of investigations launched by county attorneys across Arizona in an effort to prosecute businesses for employer sanctions violations.

### Transparency Web Site Timeline

The following key milestones have been established to ensure project implementation by Jan. 1, 2011.

- Finalize the project team** (11/30/2009)
- Update scoping and planning** (12/30/2009)
- Requirement definition refinement** (1/30/2010)
- Completion of data model** (2/28/2010)
- Test data imports** (03/31/2010)
- Test staging environment** (04/30/2010)
- User acceptance testing** (5/31/2010)
- Presentation of transparency Web site** (06/01/2010 – 09/30/2010)
- Finalize transparency site** (10/31/2010)
- Complete communication prior to "go-live"** (11/30/2010)
- Web site "go-live"** – 12/30/2010

— Source: General Accounting Office (Sept. 1) report to the governor and legislative leadership