

Editorial: Taxing and spending

A few powerful people craft the state budget. We should be told what they decide.

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In a legislative session that's chock full of invitations to lawmakers to do mischief, several excellent bills stand out. One, offered by state Sen. **Tommy Norment** (R-Williamsburg), would remove the veil of secrecy that allows a very few, very powerful legislators to shape state spending.

The budget process is straight out of Civics 101. The governor proposes, and each chamber of the legislature passes its own spending bill. A few members from each house, appointed by its leadership, retreat to hash it out.

Conference committee members don't just find common ground between the two budgets or resolve inconsistencies. They can introduce new elements that weren't in the version passed by either or both houses — new spending, new fees. They can take out items that either or both house approved. They insert policy-shaping language with no money attached.

Then each chamber votes the conference version up or down to arrive at the final spending plan. At this point, there's no opportunity to single out or amend specific items. This is often a hasty business, coming at the end of a session when adjournment is looming and legislative energy is tapped out.

So even budget items that either or both houses had specifically rejected can be, and are, approved as part of the conference budget. And changes aren't easily detected; it would take some work by a lawmaker or citizen to line the final budget up beside the two houses' versions and compare them, line by line.

Norment's bill would shine some sunshine on the process. It would require that the chairmen of the House Appropriations and Senate Finance committees issue, along with the conference panel's budget, a list of items that taxpayers and their representatives should have their attention directed to.

It would point out things in the final budget that weren't approved by either house or were in legislation that failed to pass either house. It would list earmarks for nonstate agencies like charities and museums, which politicians use to send favors, and taxpayers' money, to favorite causes back home.

This bill won't stop the process of slipping things in when only a few powerful people are playing "let's make a deal" around a table. It will just run a highlighter over them.

Had it been in place, this requirement might have alerted the public to what happened last year, when the conference committee tacked on \$100 million in fees and raised manufacturers' taxes by \$30 million, neither of which had been approved in recorded votes by the House and Senate.

Del Bob Marshall pointed this out in an op-ed in the Daily Press in September 2010, documenting how the lack of transparency allows taxing and spending to fly under the radar. It also allows lawmakers to take popular "no new tax" stands in recorded votes, knowing that conferees can ignore them and come up with the new revenue to spend.

Norment's case for his bill is straightforward: "The public and legislators should be made fully aware of what is in the budget and how it got there. There have been instances where legislators have slipped earmarks into the budget at the last minute, leaving most legislators in the dark until after the budget has passed. This is simply unacceptable."

He has been pushing this reform for years, before and while he had a seat at that conference table. The fact that his colleagues defeated this bid for accountability is telling, of course. There's hope that in the current environment of deepening public concern about government spending its day has come.

This bill has the support of the Republican caucus, and it deserves the support of all lawmakers. It could only help if the people whose money is being raised and spent make it a point to tell their delegates and senators that they it passed.