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Bloggers want to post Mount Olive BOE expenditures online

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MOUNT OLIVE -- Two community bloggers have taken the school board to task on its fiscal transparency, pledging to post school spending documents online that the board has said it would not.

Residents Scott Ireland and Larry McEntee, who host the blog Mount Olive Viewpoint, intend to put on their site the school district's monthly bill lists, detailing expenditures ranging from pencils to lawnmowers. The move comes after the board, citing concerns that it would be too time consuming, denied a request by Councilman Alex Roman to make the public documents more easily available.

"This is a public document," Ireland said of the bill list. "I find it galling when excuses are made not to give the public information which belongs to them in the first place."

The issue surfaced about six months ago when Roman, the council's liaison to the school board, asked the board to make the bill list available at public meetings. He followed up with the request two more times before getting an answer, he said.

Every school board agenda -- which is posted online the Friday before a meeting -- includes a resolution to approve the bill list, but the document itself is not available unless a resident files an Open Public Records Act request, according to Superintendent Larrie Reynolds.

"It's not a matter of it being public -- it is," Reynolds said. "The bottom line is the board doesn't want to spend taxpayer dollars putting up a list that anyone can get if they call the office and set up a time to come down to board offices to review it."

Board member James Schiess said the board's business committee was concerned with the time that would be spent redacting information, including students' names and the names of parents who receive compensation for transporting their child with special needs to an out-of-district school. Another factor, he said, was the compatibility of computer software, which he said didn't allow the information to be easily posted online.

"We have nothing to hide," Schiess said. "My personal opinion is that if it can be done easily and without revealing sensitive information, then by all means."

Board President Mark Werner was quick to point out the board never formally voted on whether to post the bill lists online, saying the administration advised against it.

Mount Olive's council puts its agendas, bill lists and minutes on its Web site. Many school districts post their agendas and minutes online, but not bill lists. Randolph's Board of Education posted bill lists online through January, but reversed the practice to conserve server space, said Michael Neves, Randolph school board administrator.

Ireland, a longtime Mount Olive resident and self-proclaimed gadfly, said he took issue with the school board's explanation, and feels the board has a "history of making it difficult for the public to get information."

Earlier this year, Ireland filed OPRA requests seeking the district's legal bills in a lawsuit against the township council over sewer fees and, another time, surveys residents filled out giving their opinion on superintendent candidates, which were considered contentious since the public appeared to favor a candidate other than the board's choice.

In August, Ireland filed another request to view the bill list and was invited to stop by the board of education office to review it, which he did. Last month, however, he requested an electronic version, and within an hour, he received one, without any items redacted.

Ireland then posted the 29-page October document, in PDF form, on the site -- www.mountolivetoday.blogspot. It details \$1,018,611 worth of expenses.

"We don't think (the board) is doing anything wrong -- they make good decisions," said McEntee, a former school board member. "Board members have a copy, but why not get the information out there to the public, let people see for themselves."