

## Let the public see the books

Politicians often misuse nomenclature to obscure the true meaning and impact of the legislation they wish to pass. That's not the case with the Transparency in Government Act, which has received lots of lip service from Gov. Jon Corzine on down, but little else.

The bill calls for the creation of a state public finance Web site that would allow taxpayers to see where every dime in every department in the state comes from and how it is spent. It is badly needed. Unfortunately, the most recent action on the bill in the Senate came a year ago, when a motion was made in the State Government Committee to table it. The Assembly version was referred to the Budget Committee in January 2008, where it has lain dormant ever since.

It's time for Corzine, who has said he supports the measure, and the bill's co-sponsor, Senate President Richard Codey, D-Essex, to get the bill moving. Sen. Jennifer Beck, R-Monmouth, a member of the Senate committee where the bill has been held up, should help resurrect it. She should work with bill sponsor Joseph Pennacchio, R-Morris, to amend it to include information about no-bid and unadvertised public contracts, which also scream out for greater transparency.

According to an Asbury Park Press investigation reported in Sunday's edition, nearly 40 cents of every dollar spent by the state government to purchase goods and services goes to firms that were awarded contracts outside the competitive bidding process. In the last five years, more than \$2.3 billion in contracts have been awarded through a waiver system that allows several exceptions to a state law requiring that contracts worth more than \$29,000 be advertised and open for public bidding.

Although agencies receiving waivers are required to obtain three quotes from vendors before awarding contracts, the lack of a central database that includes all state expenditures makes it nearly impossible for the public to keep track of the competitively bid, no-bid and waiver contracts in one place and in real time, as is done in Kansas and other states. The New Jersey database also should include the names and bid amounts of the unsuccessful vendors.

Some naysayers have questioned the cost of setting up a state public finance Web site. Pennacchio estimates it would take about \$200,000 to get it up and running — a modest sum for the benefits transparency would bring.

"The public is clamoring for this," Pennacchio said. It's time for Corzine, Codey and the Democratic-controlled Legislature to respond.

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