

'OpenGov' invites public to look closely at city finances

By Devin Marshall Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, May 4, 2016 5:02 pm

City says web resource promotes transparency

Have you ever wanted to know where your local government's money is going? Like for example, how much the City of Healdsburg is spending on the Public Works department this fiscal year?

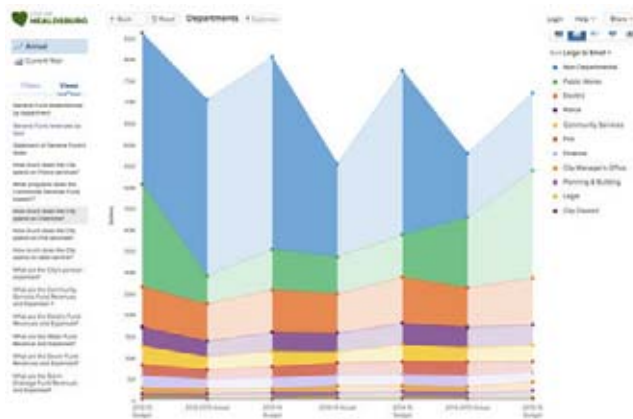
The answer to that is \$25.35 million, which is about \$8.7 million higher than last year. Healdsburg citizens can now find out this information and more with the OpenGov tool. It's on the front page of the official city page at www.ci.healdsburg.ca.us, and it allows you to manipulate data and charts on your own to find out information like Healdsburg's budgets, financial statements, spending by individual departments and even salaries.

"Governments use OpenGov internally to create custom reports, help compare year-to-date revenues and expenses to budget, keep administrators and legislators informed, and help with important workflows from the budgeting process to internal audits," said Elizabeth Garcia, Finance Manager for the City of Healdsburg. "Externally, the platform is used to publish interactive budgets, share this information with the community and even achieve revenue goals by disseminating important financial data around tax or bond measures."

The program went live on February 1. "One of the City Council goals that the City Councilmembers set for fiscal year 2015-2016 is transparency and communication," Garcia said. "They wanted to efficiently utilize electronic media resources to enhance communication within our community. The community should be able to see how their city is doing. Using OpenGov, people can look at our city's financial information and compare it to other cities."

Healdsburg's city government decided to join in after looking at several software options, and decided on this service because it is already being used by more than 300 governments in 40 different states.

"Our OpenGov site has been very well received," Garcia said. "We have gotten a lot of comments that OpenGov is easy to use and people like having access to all of the information."



This is where the money goes

A screenshot from the city's "OpenGov" web resource showing expenditures by city department.

Councilmember Eric Ziedrich is supportive of the new service as well. "I think that OpenGov can and should be a tremendous tool for our community, as I think that a most-informed public is essential to good governance," he said.

"Too often we see the public responding to issues based upon emotions or limited information. I am hopeful that a growing segment of our community will appreciate the value of OpenGov, take the time to fully research and analyze important issues, and then begin the process of swaying public opinion. On the City Council, we often find ourselves dealing with issues that unfortunately only arise because of misinformation, limited information or rumor."

According to Ziedrich, financial transparency is critical. "We're dealing with the public's money," he said. "We are supposed to represent their interests. Their feedback is of no value if they don't fully understand all aspects of the city's sources and uses of funds ... those that have taken advantage of the resource have been quite impressed with the breadth and depth of the available information."

Jim Brush, a Healdsburg CPA and Board President of the Healdsburg Museum & Historical Society, has not visited OpenGov but agrees with the concept and thinks it will make research easier. "I think it's a great idea," he said. "It's public information to begin with, and the times that I have gone to go ask for information, I prefer not to bother somebody. It's inconvenience, time and effort to get information."

Anyone who has questions or comments about OpenGov can contact Garcia at egarcia@ci.healdsburg.ca.us.