MEDIA RELEASE

Interactive "Open Government" Pension Website Launched

Questions Remain About Information Not Provided

Go to RIOpenGov.org

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Providence, RI - The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity launched today an 'open government' website that adds detailed new information to the current pension reform debate in the Ocean State.

The website, www.RIOpenGov.org, is an interactive online database of public employee pension data for current ERSRI retirees. The data, which can be viewed in both table and graph modes, was provided by ERSRI (the Employees' Retirement System of Rhode Island) through an open records request. The website was developed by Visible Government Online.

The information for 26,598 pensioners can be sorted or searched by name, retirement year, benefit type, 2010 gross pension, and disability type, among many other criteria. The website breaks out base annual pension as well as the COLA portion, and also estimates future payments - both with and without a COLA.

"Our Center has invested in this tool as part of our open government agenda because we feel it is important that complete transparency be provided to the public for this crucial debate about the future well-being of our state pensioners and for our state and local economies. All Rhode Islanders may be affected by the pending reform and have a right to know how their tax dollars are being spent", said Mike Stenhouse, CEO for the Center for Freedom. "Once you browse the wealth of data on our site, you will see that it is not fair to paint all pensioners with a single brush. Citizens will now be able to make their own judgments as to whether or not certain retiree benefits are essential to sustaining a reasonable level of retirement or if they may seem excessive."

According to Michael Walker, President of Visible Government Online, which has also developed pension websites for other states in New England, the average Rhode Island pension payment in 2010 was $31,388 (including COLA): In Massachusetts the average payment was $29,043, while in Maine it was $20,270.

The website provides a tool where visitors can change the COLA assumption and view the effect on estimated future payments. As various reform provisions are debated,
current pensioners listed will also be able to estimate the effects of COLA changes on their own individual pensions.

The website does not contain some specific information that was requested from ERSRI, such as years of credited service, total pension payments to date, and total employee contributions into the plan. A response from ERSRI indicates that while they do maintain this information in a custom database, that the data cannot be reproduced without undue burden. "While we have received a response from ERSRI, it does not adequately explain what kind of database they utilize that would not allow them to pull this data out", said Stenhouse.

Because this information was not provided, the website attempts to estimate the amount of employee contributions and past pension payments, so as to make a comparison with the anticipated lifelong benefit. The Center hopes to obtain the actual figures in the future so that factual information can be presented.

"This is an issue about real people", continued Stenhouse. "Pension reform will affect different retirees in different ways and will require all citizens to continue to share in funding pension payments. Our riopengov.org website provides both individual and group information that each of us will judge in our own way. Any opportunity for the general public to see how their tax dollars are being spent is a positive step for democracy."

Open government and other government transparency websites play an important role in allowing citizens to better understand how their government actually works and how it spends taxpayer money. Occasionally, such websites may even allow for citizens to identify and report instances of fraud, errors, or government waste.

The RI Center for Freedom plans to include additional new information in the coming months about (11) other municipal pension systems in (7) municipalities not currently administered by ERSRI. Open records requests have been sent to each of the entities. Follow up is in process. For updates and a full list of these municipal pension systems contacted, visit the organization's main website.

Visible Government Online (VisiGov), founded in 2008, creates interactive Open Government websites, featuring easy-to-use graphic displays of government data. VisiGov has built Open Government projects in 17 states, which are currently used by tens of thousands of people each month. Data display modules also include vendor payments, state revenue & expenses, property taxes, state payroll & pensions, tax credits, welfare spending, and K-12 Education spending & payroll.

The Rhode Island Center for Freedom and Prosperity is the state's leading free-enterprise public policy think tank. Firm in its belief that freedom is indispensable to citizens' well-being and prosperity, the Center for Freedom's mission is to restore competitiveness to Rhode Island through the advancement of market-based reform solutions.

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