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See how your city or town ranks on spending, taxes and more

By Barbara O'Brien
News Staff Reporter

Springville spends more per capita than Buffalo, but has lower taxes per person, and Amherst spends less but has higher taxes per capita.

More interested in how Erie County fares compared to other counties? No problem.

The possibilities of comparing spending and taxes for every municipality in the state are endless on a new online database unveiled Wednesday.

"Benchmarking New York" includes levels of spending, taxes and debt per capita for villages, towns, cities and counties.

"Businesses have long known the benefits of benchmarking," said Kenneth Adams, president of the Business Council. "This tool will allow taxpayers to measure government performance in the same way."

The searchable database was developed by the Business Council's Public Policy Institute and the Manhattan Institute's Empire Center for New York State Policy.

"It doesn't so much give you answers as create a whole new set of questions," said E.J. McMahon, director of the Empire Center for New York State Policy. "I would not be surprised if this is something that will be used in political campaigns."

"Benchmarking" is the latest addition to the Empire Center's comprehensive site of government spending. It started eight months ago with the payrolls of workers in the executive branch, Legislature and judiciary branches of state government. It includes employment contracts for every school district in the state and pork barrel spending for state legislators.

To reach the Web site, go to www.seethroughny.net, then click on "Benchmarks" to search for spending and taxing of municipalities.

The data comes from www.openbooknewyork.com, State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli's Open Book Web

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site. The latest information is from 2007, and it will be updated when data for 2008 becomes available later this year, McMahon said.

"This is just the start. We want to keep building on this," he said.

Plans call for adding a second tier of information, and spending for school districts will be available soon, he said.

Usually a business sets a price, and the customer determines the value, Adams said. But when government sets the price, citizens have a difficult time determining the value, he said.

"This gives you a way to judge the value when you're paying all these taxes, you're getting all these services," he said.

Adams said the Business Council believes the 550,000 businesses in the state should know how much their local government costs, particularly compared with those of similar municipalities.

"We want to deepen their awareness of local government spending," he said.

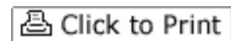
The Business Council was involved in last year's push for a limit on property taxes and is interested in consolidating services to save money.

"This tool lets people get a better handle on value," he said.

bobrien@buffnews.com

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