

Investigating the City . . . A Reporter's Checklist

The Budget

- *Spells priorities of a local government*
- *Check for responsiveness: citizens' concerns, development plans, mission statement*
- *Check against promises and pledges*
- *Get raw data; plug into spreadsheets*
- *Multi-year: 3-5 years; a decade's worth*
- *Compare with preceding years*
- *Proposed vs. final*
- *Distribution across sectors, departments*
- *Public hearings*
- *Line items*
- *Budget threshold limits*
- *Regular and supplemental budgets*
- *Budget realignments*
- *Budget codes*

Budget: Balancing Act

- *Income (Revenue) = Spending (Expenditure)*

Income: Taxes

- *Are there new or higher taxes?*
- *Who are tax exempt? Who got tax breaks or discounts?*
- *Who are the tax delinquents? Were they fined? Who benefits from tax amnesty?*
- *Who are the top taxpayers?*
- *How healthy are industries that make up the local tax base?*
- *How diverse is the local tax base?*
- *When was the last time the local government updated assessment values?*
- *What are tax valuations of public officials and their friends compared to their neighbors?*

Income: Other means

- *Regulatory and service fees*
- *Aids and grants*
- *Corporate: Loans, bonds, economic enterprises*

Spending (Expenditure)

- *Spending vs appropriated amount*
- *Comprehensive annual financial report*
- *Accomplishment reports*
- *Budget document*
- *Agencies involved in budget review and accountability*

Contracts: What to look at

- *Is there an appropriation?*

- *Is it in the procurement program?*
- *Who's on the vendors' list?*
- *Check everything: From big- to small-ticket items*

Contracts: Red flags

- *No public bidding*
- *Rigged bidding*
- *Narrow specifications*
- *Splitting of contracts*
- *Change orders*
- *Cost overruns*
- *Overpricing*
- *Under-deliveries and non-delivery (ghost delivery)*
- *Inferior or substandard products or service*
- *Double payments*
- *Red tape*

Contracts: Also look for...

- *Conflict of interest*
- *Corruption*
- *Sources of information*
- *Comparative analysis*

Payroll

- *Nepotism*
- *Special and confidential positions*
- *Casuals*
- *Appointments to juicy positions*
- *Ghost employees*
- *Employee overtime*
- *Incentives, benefits for select group*

Perks

- *Expense account*
- *Travel*
- *Cell phone calls*
- *Acquisition/use of government property and supplies for personal use*
- *Discretionary spending: intelligence funds, development funds*

Audits

- *Who audits?*
- *How thorough was the audit?*
- *Which agency or unit is unaudited?*
- *How did auditors audit?*

Source: *The Investigative Reporter's Handbook*