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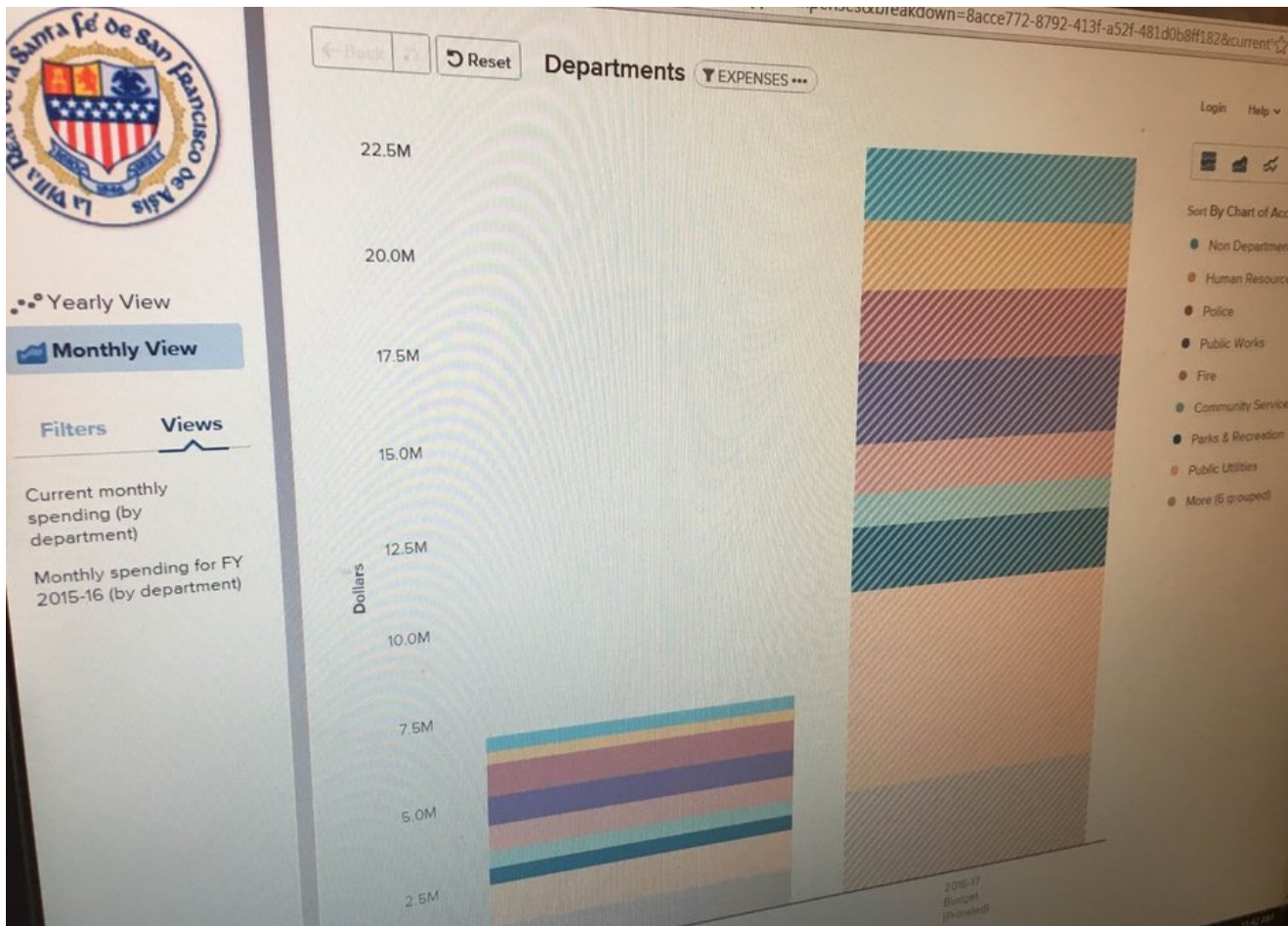EVENTS (/events)   PAPERS (/library)   TOPICS (/topics)

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Santa Fe, N.M., Launches Open Data Spending Portal

In a partnership with OpenGov, Santa Fe released an online spending portal, thus creating more transparency within city government.

BY JUSTIN HORWATH, THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN / AUGUST 11, 2016

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(TNS) -- The city of Santa Fe on Wednesday launched a new website that officials say gives the public "unprecedented access to city budget data."

The online transparency portal comes as City Hall continues to face criticisms over a budget gap of up to $15 million that led to service cuts and fee hikes for the current fiscal year. It also follows scathing reviews of the city's management of a $30 million bond program for park improvement projects.

Santa Fe Mayor Javier Gonzales, at a Wednesday presentation of the website, said city officials continually heard during budget debates about the "public not really knowing what led to the deficit."

The goal of the new online tool, at santafe.opengov.com (http://santafe.opengov.com/), "is to be able to, with the convenience of a citizen, look at the city budget and understand how the resources have been allocated," Gonzales said. The website, he added, will allow "constituents to monitor how the city is spending money month over month."

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Residents who visit the site will be able to download and analyze budget information for individual city departments and compare the city's revenues with expenses.

The city is paying a Silicon Valley company, OpenGov Inc., $7,900 annually for the online platform.

Officials say the website is a part of a broader effort to put more information online in the years to come. Renée Martinez, Santa Fe's information technology director, said the city is in contract negotiations with a vendor to implement new software that will help automate financial processes.

The city's effort is part of a national open-data trend in which governments are posting more public information online, making records easier to access and alleviating the pressure on government workers tasked with fulfilling public records requests. Transparency advocates have hailed the trend, saying tools that make more information available to residents will make officials more accountable to the people they serve.

The New Mexico Foundation for Open Government released a review in August 2015 that ranked the city of Santa Fe's government website the third most transparent compared to the websites of 30 other cities in the state. But a report gave the city low marks for its failure to make budget data accessible to residents.

"No financial audits were found in the finance portion of the website or in the Internal Audit section," the review said. "Additionally no financial audits were found when utilizing the search feature."

The review also gave Santa Fe low marks for failing to post information on vendors and contracts. Such records are not available through the new transparency portal, but Martinez, the information technology director, said a plan is underway to add that information to the site.

Tom Johnson, executive director of the Institute for Analytic Journalism, said in an email that the $7,900 price tag for the city's new online platform was "reasonable."

"Overall, this is a nice step toward Open Data progress," Johnson said. "And we can/should expect regular iterations toward making the site more usable and with enriched data."

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