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Coral Gables makes information easy to access

Jackie Bueno Sousa's Jan. 5 column, *A transparent government isn't necessarily a direct one*, takes issue with governments, like the city of Coral Gables, that try to provide financial and other important information to the public. In Sousa's view, Coral Gables and other governments, including the state of Florida, provide a lot of information, but do not tell citizens what's important and what they should know.

Of course, citizens themselves don't always agree on what is important, and for that reason Coral Gables tries to provide a broad range of relevant data, including posting the city's annual financial reports on its website and timely updates on a variety of topics through its online newsletter, "e-News."

Coral Gables' employee pension plan is a case in point. The city's financial reports contain several pages on the pension plan, including a detailed breakdown of assets and liabilities. The city's pension obligations, like those of cities and states throughout the country, have grown in recent years largely as a result of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

City leaders have not hidden the city's pension problems. Rather, they have taken bold action to reform pension benefits and reduce pension costs. During the past seven years, the city, with the cooperation of the employee unions, has made several meaningful cost-saving changes to the pension plan. Those included across-the-board employee contributions to help support their future benefits, an approach only now being considered by the Legislature for the state's pension plan.

Last August, after many months of negotiations and deliberation, the City Commission adopted sweeping changes to the general employee pension plan that, if they survive pending legal challenges, will significantly reduce the city's pension costs.

It is easy to criticize government for not providing enough information to taxpayers and the public; but many local governments, including Coral Gables, have gone to great lengths to make meaningful information about their finances and operations readily available. It is a far greater challenge to use the information to make informed decisions that will benefit citizens for many years in the future.

DON SLESNICK, mayor, Coral Gables
