

The Regional Reporter

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FEBRUARY 2006

Lobbying records a goldmine for stories

By SEAN REILLY

Mobile Register / Newhouse News Service

The revolving door. Campaign contributions. Earmarks. Quid pro quo.

Thanks to people like disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who has pleaded guilty to using free trips, meals and campaign contributions to try to bribe lawmakers for official favors, and former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-Calif., who pleaded guilty to accepting unrelated bribes, those well-worn Washington themes have suddenly captured the attention of people outside the Washington Beltway.

For regional reporters, what better time to explore the back-scratching relationships between hometown members of Congress and their best buds on K Street? What do the lobbyists give members of Congress — and what do they get in return?

Since lawmakers are rarely eager to discuss those details, public records are essential for reporters seeking to uncover this relationship.

The first stop should be the House and Senate records offices, located, respectively, in the basement of the Cannon House Office Building and Room 232 of the Hart Senate Office Building. There, you can find

scanned versions of the disclosure reports that lobbyists are supposed to file for each new client.

To its credit, the Senate has put those records online at <http://sopr.senate.gov>. You also can search the records at PoliticalMoneyLine.com — if you are a subscriber — or on computer terminals at the House Legislative Resource Center in the Cannon basement, but you have to pay for each page you print.

Those reports can be searched by lobbyist name or client name. The Senate system also allows sorting by state, meaning that you can find every corporation, university, non-profit and local government in your state or coverage area that is seeking something from the federal government. That alone may be a story.

The first report you'll find for each client is a "Lobbying Registration" form that will list the name of the lobbying firm, client, general description of the client's business or activities, names of lobbyists working for that client, and — often in the vaguest terms imaginable — what issues they are lobbying members of Congress on.

After the initial registration report is filed, the lobbying firm is required to file a Mid-year Report that covers activity from Jan. 1 to June 30, and a Year-End Report that covers activity from July 1 to Dec. 31.

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Illustration by
Chris Campbell

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By SAMANTHA YOUNG ■ Stephens Media Group

Newsmaker events begin promising '06

Happy New Year!

It's already been a productive one for the Regional Reporters Association with a budget seminar in January and newsmaker coming up in a few weeks with Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns.

Newsmakers and panels organized by our board members are part of what makes our association valuable to the more than 100 regional reporters across town that are members of RRA. We strive to make these events relevant to your job, offering the chance to speak with Cabinet secretaries and other experts when legislation that they are involved in is moving through Congress.

Last December, Interior Secretary Gale Norton met with about 15 regional reporters to make the Bush administration's case for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife

Refuge (ANWR), while senators were debating the merits of the proposal on the Senate floor (see related story).

This month, Johanns will sit down with RRA to talk about agriculture policy at the same time that Congress begins hearings on reauthorizing the farm bill.

At each newsmaker, the official or Cabinet secretary present will offer opening remarks, followed by questions from regional questions. So, if you're like me and don't cover ANWR, but want to throw a federal land policy question at Norton, you can do that at these meetings.

We have requests for RRA newsmakers pending with every Cabinet head, and we renew those requests when their agencies are in the news.

As we continue to pitch newsmakers, we feel it would serve the RRA membership if

you could suggest some cabinet heads you would like to interview. What issues are you following this year?

Johanns will meet with us at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 14, at the Agriculture Department. To sign up for this event, please e-mail regionalreporters@yahoo.com with your name and publication. We'll e-mail directions to those who respond.

Last month's budget seminar was held with our partners at the The National Press Foundation and The Center on Congress at Indiana University. We hope reporters found it helpful as they prepared for Bush's annual budget release Feb. 6.

Please e-mail us at regionalreporters@yahoo.com to give us your suggestions for future newsmakers and/or panels.

We hope to make it a productive and newsworthy year.

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JOB OPENINGS

REPORTER, LAS VEGAS SUN

The Las Vegas Sun is looking for a bureau reporter to cover Washington policies and politics that affect Nevada.

Primary duties of the job include covering the state's five lawmakers, including Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid. The job also includes close coverage of the Yucca Mountain project, budget issues and lands issues. The Sun is looking for applicants with a flair for storytelling and a talent for enterprise.

Please send a cover letter, resume and clips to Mike Kelley, Managing Editor, Las Vegas Sun, 2275 Corporate Circle, Suite 300, Henderson, NV, 89074.

The deadline is March 10.

REPORTER, OMAHA WORLD-HERALD

The Omaha World-Herald, an employee-owned, 235,000 circulation newspaper, is looking for a reporter for our Washington bureau.

The reporter's primary responsibility will be to provide daily coverage of the Nebraska and Iowa congressional delegations. The reporter will keep in frequent contact with the lawmakers and their staffs, providing readers insight into what the delegations are doing, legislation the members are working on, issues they are picking up from constituents and how they use their public offices.

The reporter will need to be on Capitol Hill often and be in contact with federal agencies, think tanks and lobbyists to learn about and explain to readers the roles and impact of area congressmen. The reporter also will help cover U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns and actions by the Department of Agriculture that affect Nebraskans and Iowans.

If interested, please email a cover letter, resume and clips to: jcarney@owh.com. Applications can be mailed to Jeff Carney, Assistant Managing Editor, The Omaha World-Herald, 14th & Dodge streets, Omaha NE 68102.

The application deadline is Feb. 28.

Newsmaker events ...

Nicholson defends VA health care benefits

An influx of veterans injured in Iraq and Afghanistan is “not overwhelming” the system designed to care for them, Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson told regional reporters at a Dec. 16th newsmaker.

In all, about 120,000 people — both disabled and able-bodied — who have served in the two wars have gotten some form of care from the VA system, Nicholson said.

“That’s only two percent of our patient base,” he said.

About 20,000 of those had been injured.

Those returning from combat “are priorities,” Nicholson said, “both in the care that we want to give them and the transition” out of the active-duty military.

Nonetheless, critics have questioned whether the department is getting enough money to handle new enrollees. Since President Bush took office in 2001, funding for the VA system is up 50 percent, Nicholson said, adding that the department’s budget for fiscal 2006, which includes \$21 billion for medical care, is adequate.

Five reporters attended the hour-long newsmaker with Nicholson, which was held at the VA’s headquarters in downtown Washington. Nicholson, a Vietnam veteran, has been in the job since January of last year.

In surveying new initiatives, he singled out the department’s work on treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and noted efforts to deal with the growing number of older vets. Forty percent are age 65 and older — roughly three times the percentage of elderly in the general population.

On a practical note, the department is pursuing a “major expansion” of its cemetery system. It is also putting more emphasis on home care and telemedicine, he said.

“The best place to keep an aging person is in their own habitat and around their own loved ones,” Nicholson said.

Nicholson deflected a question on whether Medicare should have the same freedom to negotiate drug prices with its suppliers that the veterans department already enjoys. The 2003 law creating a Medicare prescription drug benefit bars the federal government from bargaining with pharmaceutical companies for that program.

While negotiation “works wonderfully for us,” Nicholson said, the VA’s purchases represent only about four percent of the prescription drug market.

“I don’t think we’re having a material effect on their (drug makers’) bottom line,” he said.

— By SEAN REILLY,
Mobile Register / Newhouse News Service

Norton makes case for ANWR drilling

Interior Secretary Gale Norton continued the administration’s pitch to drill for oil in the Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, better known as ANWR, at a meeting with Regional Reporters Association members in December.

The newsmaker took place just a few days before the Senate rejected the proposal.

The ANWR debate, however, shows no signs of stopping, so information the RRA members received at the Norton meeting should still be useful for future stories.

Norton emphasized that ANWR has the potential to produce the same amount of oil everyday that is on par with the whole state of Texas.

She said opening ANWR to drilling is vital to reducing the country’s depen-

dence on foreign sources of oil, especially because there are not many domestic sources of oil.

Following Norton’s presentation on ANWR, regional reporters peppered her with questions on everything from issues at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and gaming to off-shore drilling and water claims in the West.

Proposed reforms for the 1872 Mining Law, which came up during the meeting, were eventually taken off the table as Congress wrapped up for the year, but Norton said it’s likely that the issue will come up again.

“We’ll have to look at an overall package before we know what makes up the best one,” Norton said.

— By SUZANNE STRUGLINSKI,
Deseret Morning News

LOBBY

Continued from Page 1

These reports must state approximately how much the lobbyists got paid to lobby for that client. If any members of the lobbying team are former congressional staffers that are covered by the one-year restriction on buttonholing their ex-bosses, that’s supposed to be reported as well. Also, if the client is a foreign entity, that also must be reported.

A Termination Report must be filed when a firm ceases to lobby for a client.

In the last few years, there has been an explosion in how many earmarks have been added to federal spending bills. Now, it seems, even tiny municipalities are seeing the need for hired help to land federal dollars.

Considering that that help usually doesn’t come cheap, does the investment in a lobbyist pay off for these cities or towns? Are they seeking lobbying assistance because competing local governments or institutions are using them? Why can’t they take their request for help directly to their local member of Congress instead of resorting to an intermediary, which they pay for by using taxpayer dollars?

If you have a member on the House or Senate appropriations committee, it can be fruitful to go through the most recent crop of spending bills (available on Congress’s Web site at www.thomas.loc.gov) to see who actually received earmarked money. By definition, earmarks are an act of favoritism. Lawmakers get far more pleas for assistance than they can fill, so who were the winners? Did the lucky recipients hire a former staffer to get the member’s ear? How much did they pay to get the earmark?

Whoever was the lobbyist, did he or she make campaign contributions? The Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org) and PoliticalMoneyLine.com have handy “donor lookup” features that let you track individual giving patterns.

Also on file at the public records offices are the personal finance reports that lawmakers turn in each May. You can look up past reports or reports from former members of Congress in bound books at the House and Senate public records offices and Xerox them for a fee. All congressional candidates also are required to file a personal disclosure report with these offices.

Note that some of these reports have been

LOBBY continues on Page 7 >>

EPA seeks to relax rules on toxic chemical reporting

By LINDA DONO
Gannett News Service

Information that many reporters and researchers now take for granted will be gathered less often and be less available if the federal government gets its way.

After fewer than 20 years of enforcement, the Environmental Protection Agency wants to allow industry to report its toxic chemical emissions every other year instead of annually, citing the paperwork burden to businesses required to comply. It also wants to raise emissions requirements so fewer businesses would be required to report.

Critics say the agency wants to gut a program that works just fine.

"The TRI (Toxic Release Inventory program) is one of the best bargains U.S. industry ever received," the Society of Environmental Journalists said in its letter calling for the EPA to abandon its proposals.

The federal comment period on the emissions proposal ended Jan. 13, and the earliest any changes could take effect would be December of this year, according to Suzanne Ackerman, an EPA spokeswoman. The alternate-year reporting idea has not reached the proposal stage yet, so the earliest that could happen would be September 2008.

"Faced with ballooning public demands after the 1984 Bhopal disaster for more federal regulation of toxic releases and chemical safety, industry avoided greater regulation by agreeing to give the U.S. public more information. There is no less need for that information today," SEJ said in its letter.

An estimated 2,500 people died Dec. 3, 1984, in Bhopal, India, when tons of toxic methyl isocyanate gas escaped from a Union Carbide pesticide plant.

Eight months later at a Union Carbide plant that kept the same type of chemical in Institute, W.Va., a less toxic leak sent 134 people to the hospital.

The next year, Congress enacted land-

mark right-to-know legislation that allows the American public to find out what chemicals are stored in industrial plants and how much of those chemicals the plants discharge annually into the environment.

Before the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act went into effect in 1987, people who lived near a factory weren't able to obtain that information because companies were worried about spilling trade secrets.

"I and my family need to know more, not less, about what chemicals and wastes are in my community," said Ellen Torrence of Nashville, Tenn. Her letter to the EPA was one of 2,000 public comments the

food processor that exceeds thresholds for emitting substances like ammonia.

Manufacturers and other businesses required to file generally endorse the EPA's proposal to lessen reporting requirements, citing the detailed training they must give employees to fulfill the current rules. Some interests, like the American Petroleum Institute, would like more relief and want a simple form that would allow plants to certify that they had no significant change when compared with a base year.

"The burden we bear in preparing the annual TRI report has remained essentially the same, regardless of the significant

decrease in releases," said Nancy J. Dotson, environmental associate at Eastman Chemical Co. in Kingsport, Tenn.

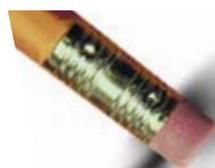
Dotson said her company has reduced its releases by 83 percent from 1988 to 2004 but has seen little reward by way of paperwork reductions.

The ability to report electronically has saved some time,

but Dotson said that new reporting requirements on additional chemicals have largely offset the savings.

Under the EPA's proposal, as many as 10 percent of the communities that now have a plant required to submit toxic release inventory information could lose all reported data, according to the National Environmental Trust. The environmental advocacy group contends that the EPA plan poses a risk to residents and first responders such as police and firefighters.

"Raising the reporting threshold to 10 times its current level, moving from annual reporting to every-other-year reporting, and allowing for less detailed reporting on persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic chemicals poses a significant threat to our nation's health, safety and environmental quality," said Joseph A. Gardella



TRI

Toxic Release Inventory

Illustration by Chris Campbell

agency received and has put online so far, mostly from private citizens.

"My right to know about pollution and waste should not be sacrificed to save companies a few pages of paperwork," Torrence wrote.

Because of the 1986 law and a later Pollution Prevention Act in 1990, companies with 10 or more employees in industries such as manufacturing, mining, oil and gas, and waste management now have to file detailed public reports on nearly 650 poisonous or cancer-causing chemicals they discharge into the air, pipe into waterways, ship to landfills or inject underground. They also have to tell state and local governments about chemicals on site.

The law not only affects a plastics plant in the industrial part of town but also a

Covering the federal budget all year long

By PAUL M. KRAWZAK
Copley News Service

Advance preparation and understanding the fundamentals of the budget process are key to covering President Bush's proposed 2007 budget both on the day it's released and throughout the rest of the year, according to reporters, congressional staff and others who shared their expertise in a Jan. 23 seminar.

For starters, what is the significance of the president's budget? "It's as much a statement of philosophy as anything else, a philosophical and political statement," said Keith Kennedy, staff director of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

But it still has significance. Congress ultimately approves about 90 percent of what the president proposes in the budget, former Indiana Rep. Lee Hamilton, director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, observed.

Reporters should do enough homework before the budget is released Feb. 6 to get an idea of how spending increases or cuts would affect their communities or states, said panelists at the event, which was sponsored by the National Press Foundation, Center on Congress at Indiana University and Regional Reporters Association.

This will help write meaningful stories about the budget and help pave the way for writing additional budget stories during the rest of the year.

Keep in mind that the budget plan released on Feb. 6 is only the administration's opening offer in what normally involves months of negotiation with Congress.

THE BUDGET PROCESS

That budget proposal is followed by the creation of a budget resolution in both chambers of Congress. While the budget resolution lacks the force of law, it represents an agreement between the House and Senate on the overall size of the budget.

As authorizing committees, such as the House Education and the Workforce Committee, go through the process of authorizing federal programs to receive tax dollars, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees craft spending bills that will give the federal government specific authority to spend money on certain programs in the coming year.

In what is called a 302 (a) allocation, the budget resolution determines how much total spending the appropriations committees will have to work with. The appropriations committees subsequently divvy up the dollars among their subcommittees

**THE APPENDIX,
ONE OF THE
BUDGET BOOKS,
IS TYPICALLY THE
MOST HELPFUL
DOCUMENT FOR
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REPORTERS SINCE
IT CONTAINS THE
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PROPOSED
PROJECTS.**



Illustration by Chris Campbell

(12 in the Senate and 11 in House) in a 302 (b) allocation.

The end of the budget year includes final passage of appropriations bills on or before the start of the 2007 federal fiscal year on Oct. 1. Some years, such as in 2006, Congress also does a budget reconciliation process, which is used to cut or raise taxes and modify mandatory spending.

While following the budget, however, it's important to grasp the difference between mandatory and discretionary spending, said David Rogers, reporter for the Wall Street Journal.

About two-thirds of the budget is taken up in mandatory spending on programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, which grow automatically each year, without congressional action, as a result of increases in population or demand.

Discretionary spending, which fuels most domestic and military programs, accounts for about one-third of the budget. Congress must determine the level of discretionary spending each year.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE BUDGET

Regional reporters who need to find out how a budget proposal might affect their readers should check with their lawmakers' offices, since they are briefed on the budget, said

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TRI

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Jr., a chemistry professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo who uses the data in his research.

Gardella considers annual reporting imperative to building trust between companies and the communities exposed to their releases, something especially important since Hurricane Katrina and the inadvertent spilling of chemicals into the floodwater when plants were damaged in the storm.

"Please keep the requirements for the Toxic Release Inventory Program as they are," said Scarlett Donnarumma of Roselle Park, N.J. "As you know, New Jersey suffers from a high rate of cancer, asthma and other toxic-induced maladies. Please keep our air and water clean."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Today's Toxic Release Inventory (TRI) records are generated because of laws passed in Congress. The reporting requirements affect businesses in your hometown. Residents in your area can use the information to see what chemicals are being discharged close to home.

Here's how you can explain what's happening:

» **Analyze the toxic release inventory data for your coverage area.**

It was one of the earliest sets of government data available electronically, first through mailing a computer disk and now on the Internet. Several Web sites below can get you started, point you to the biggest polluters and allow you to compare emission levels over several years.

» **See who cares locally.** The comment period for the EPA's proposal ended Jan. 13, and electronic versions of the letters submitted are on the Web. Almost 2,000 comments have been posted so far from citizens, activists, business owners and trade groups.

Call members of neighborhood watch committees who have been active in the past in monitoring pollution or disease clusters, academicians who do research and local manufacturers that have reduced toxic emissions through the years. Ask how they've used the data, especially since it's been available on the Web.

» **Find out your lawmaker's stance.** See whether it's been consistent through the years. Some have submitted public comments on the EPA's proposed rule changes. Others have been silent so far. Though Congress won't have to act to make this proposal official, you can bet that members will have influence, in part because they control the EPA's purse strings.

» **Ask for correspondence.** Through a Freedom of Information Act request, government watchdog group OMB Watch found out about an interesting set of meetings between EPA officials and a former chemical industry lobbyist who now works for the Small Business Administration. The SBA official had conferred on at least 14 occasions and in numerous e-mails about the EPA's proposed rule changes while the agency was consulting with the public. The EPA eventually adopted three of the SBA's four main requests as its proposal, according to OMB Watch. Look at who's been writing to your lawmaker on this issue and the letters and e-mail he or she might have written to the EPA, business groups or environmental groups.

» **Follow the money.** Check campaign finance reports for your lawmaker to see which industry or company political action committees — manufacturing, oil and gas, utilities, mining, chemical and waste management companies — have made campaign donations in the past two or three years.

ON THE WEB

Toxic Release Inventory

- » www.epa.gov/tri/tridata/tri03/2003eReport.pdf: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 2003 national summary, the latest government analysis available.
- » www.epa.gov/triexplorer: EPA's TRI Explorer searchable database with toxic release inventory information from 1988 to 2003.
- » www.epa.gov/tri/tridata: EPA's home page for toxic release inventory data from 1996 to 2003, including state fact sheets that link to county fact sheets.
- » www.epa.gov/tri-efdr: EPA plant-level data for 2004. This page will close down and its data added to the other databases when the agency analyzes the plants' reports.
- » <http://d1.rtknet.org/tri>: RTK Net, a project of OMB Watch. The watchdog group has a link on its site explaining how to use the government data it simplifies and has the EPA data from 1987 to 2003.

Public comments

- » www.regulations.gov/fdmspublic-rel11/component/main: Type EPA-HQ-TRI-2005-0073 in the Docket ID box and hit Submit to see a link to the comments. The site is not set up to search by letter-writer's state or hometown, so you'll have to click on individual comments to determine the source.
- » www.att.com/directory: AT&T Directory Assistance. Allows you to find phone numbers for people listed in the public comments if their numbers are in local phone books.

Campaign finance reports

- » www.opensecrets.org: Center for Responsive Politics. Click on the Who Gives tab then PACs and choose Misc Business under Locate industries by economic sector. Or pick an industry from the alphabetized list. From there you can click on your favorite political action committee, then the list recipients link. Or conversely, choose the Who Gets tab, then Congress and type in your Congress member's name. From there, click on List PAC Contributions on the left rail to see the industry sectors represented and drill down to learn more.
- » www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/srseae.shtml: Federal Election Commission. This page allows you to search by candidate. Click through to the report generated and you can then click on Non-Party (e.g. PACs) or Other Committees to see a list of PAC contributions. It is not categorized by industry.

Other information

- » <http://api-ec.api.org/enviro/index.cfm?bitmask=00100300700100000>: American Petroleum Institute. Click on Your Right-To-Know for the trade group's page on the toxic release inventory.
- » www.net.org/health/tri.vtml: National Environmental Trust's study on the toxic release inventory proposal.
- » www.nma.org/policy/tri/what_is_tri.asp: National Mining Association's toxic release inventory information.
- » www.ombwatch.org/article/articleview/3235/1/411 and www.ombwatch.org/article/articleview/3156/1/402: OMB Watcher newsletter's articles on the EPA's proposal.
- » www.safefromtoxics.org/toxicuse.asp?id2=18083&id3=toxicuse&: State Public Interest Research Groups' backgrounder on the EPA's proposal.

LOBBY

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scanned and are available to subscribers of PoliticalMoneyLine.com.

The personal financial disclosure reports list lawmakers' assets, debts and any outside income in broad ranges. They also list any gifts the lawmaker received, donations they made in lieu of speaking fees, or trips they took in the preceding year that were paid for by private group.

Note that you don't have to wait until this report comes out to find out what trips your lawmaker has taken at the expense of private organizations. The reports are supposed to be filed within 30 days of the trip.

These trips are supposed to be "educational" in nature, but — as shown by former House Majority Leader Tom Delay's now-famous golfing foray to Scotland — that term can be elastic. Whatever the educational value of travel, the destinations — at least within the United States — tend to be close to the beach or mountains. The agendas usually leave plenty of time for rest and relaxation or sightseeing.

One easy story is to count up the biggest trip-takers in your delegation. You find a list of the biggest congressional travelers on PoliticalMoneyLine.com that can be sorted by the cost of travel or number of trips. Using that feature, you can easily report who was the biggest traveler among your state or regional delegation.

But you'll also want to query the lawmakers on why they took these trips? What do they get out of it other than a winter tan?

Some lawmakers don't travel much themselves, but let staff members take liberal advantage of trip opportunities. You'll need to look up the paper reports on the Hill to find details on these trips. Do those trips have any relevance to staffers' day jobs — or are they essentially junkets?

BUDGET

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Samantha Young, a reporter for Stephens Media who covers Washington for several states.

Governors' lobbying offices in Washington and interest groups also may be able to share how an anticipated budget plan would affect people back home, said Young, president of RRA.

Reporters who have military bases in their area can benefit from the Pentagon's budget briefing, even if they are not regular Pentagon correspondents.

"You can ask local questions," Young said.

On budget day itself, along with picking up the president's proposal or viewing it online, many reporters go to budget briefings held by federal agencies. Even if you can't make it to these briefings, many agencies provide a separate book of budget breakouts to reporters online or in paper form anytime after budget day.

The appendix, one of the budget books, is typically the most helpful document for regional reporters since it contains the most detail on proposed projects. Use the "search" function to find names of cities, counties, states and projects in the online version of the budget.

This can yield clues to the impact of the budget back home and give you a plethora of story ideas even beyond budget day itself.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

Key dates in 2006 for Federal Election Commission reports

House and Senate campaigns

Jan. 31: Year-End Report for 2005 (covers Oct. 1 – Dec. 31, 2005)

April 15 – 1st Quarter (covers Jan. 1 – March 31)

July 15 – 2nd Quarter (covers April 1 – June 30)

Oct. 15 – 3rd Quarter (covers July 1 – Sept. 30)

Certain PACs and party committees

Jan. 31: Year-End Report for 2005

Feb. 20: January Report

March 20: February Report

April 20: March Report

May 20: April Report

June 20: May Report

July 20: June Report

Aug. 20: July Report

Sept. 20: August Report

Oct. 20: September Report

Oct. 26: Pre-General Report (covers Oct. 1-18)

Dec. 7: Post-General Report (covers Oct. 19-Nov. 27)

— Source: Federal Election Commission

In the budget document, words in Roman type refer to the previous year's enacted spending. When something is enclosed in brackets, it is proposed for deletion. Language that is italicized refers to proposed spending.

FINDING CONTEXT, LOCAL ANGLES, TRENDS

A good way to provide context to any budget story is to compare the current budget offering to federal departments' final budgets in the preceding year. You also can look at committee or subcommittee hearings that preceded adoption of the budgets.

Another way to cover the budget is to find out which institutions in your coverage area, such as local hospitals, rely on federal dollars, said Alysoun McLaughlin, associate legislative director for the National Association of Counties.

You can check back with these groups after the budget has been released — and later in the year as the budget makes its way through Congress — for meaningful follow-up stories.

Getting a copy of the Congressional Budget Office forecast, which was released Jan. 26, can provide insight into the nation's fiscal picture as you review the budget, several at the seminar said.

Reporters should look for trends in the budget, such as spending on fighting disease, Rogers said. You can find out how these spending trends affect your local area for enterprise stories following the budget's release.

