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Web site lets New Yorkers track government

By Melissa Mansfield

ALBANY - Hoping to alleviate the public's cynicism about state government that he encountered while campaigning for office last year, Attorney General Andrew Cuomo unveiled a new Web site yesterday that will allow residents to view a bill, see who lobbied for it, and who donated to its sponsors' campaign.

"Cleaning up Albany was the catchphrase, meaning restoring the trust between the citizens and their government," Cuomo told members of good government groups, public officials and their staffs, who were on hand to hear about Project Sunlight, sunlightny.com. "Government by definition is only as good as the trust that the citizens place in it. The more we can expose, the more we can restore trust, the better."

The Web site compiles several public databases, such as campaign finance and lobbying disclosures, and allows users to browse through information by elected official, legislation and lobbyist. Visitors also can search through campaign finance disclosures, lobbying lists, corporations, charities and state contracts, at the same time.

The site also boasts a map of New York State that shows how many member items - grants earmarked by legislators - are dispersed by county. With a quick dragging of the mouse, users can see the disparities between counties: Albany County received

222 grants this year, while Schoharie County, its western neighbor, received 13.

One could then click to read up on the grants and projects, by county, or by legislator.

For those unfamiliar with member items, or campaign finance disclosures, or other subjects discussed on the site, there are video explanations of terms and processes of New York State government.

The \$701,000 project originally proposed in January was part of this year's budget, agreed upon by Gov. Eliot Spitzer, Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

Spitzer spokesman Errol Cockfield said, "Project Sunlight provides a 'one-stop' location for a wealth of information ... and is part of ongoing efforts to increase transparency and accountability in government."

The Web site, which went live yesterday afternoon, is not the finished product, according to Cuomo. Members of his office will tour the state, seeking input and suggestions on how to expand the databases, what to include, and how to present the information.

Bob Ward, New York State government historian and deputy director of the Rockefeller Institute of Government, said, "New Yorkers want and need to learn more about what Albany does, and why. Project Sunlight is an important step toward a better-informed citizenry, and no doubt will serve as a model for greater transparency in other states."