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How an Arcane, New Accounting Standard is Helping Reporters Follow the Money.

MARK NIESSE WAS one of two reporters in a conference room inside a government building in downtown Atlanta in June 2017, listening to a presentation about an obscure accounting rule change. For the first time ever, governments were required to release detailed information about tax breaks given to companies. Niesse, a reporter at the Atlanta-Journal Constitution, hoped to answer a question that had long nagged him: Are tax incentives worth it?

In Fulton County, the largest of nine counties in the Atlanta metro area, officials were trying to comply with the new disclosures and had hired Ernst & Young to help. As the accountants spoke, Niesse peppered them with questions. At one point, the accountants left the room to discuss the accuracy of their numbers. “When they came back out, they agreed they needed to present the information in a clearer way,” Niesse recalls. That’s when Niesse noticed an extensive spreadsheet on an accountant’s laptop, open on the conference room table. Unlike the PowerPoint, the spreadsheet was crystal clear: it showed the parcel IDs and property taxes not paid on every recent development in Fulton County.

Niesse made a verbal FOIA request to the public relations officials in attendance. “They weren’t counting on that,” he recalls. Back in the newsroom, he followed up with a written request, and by late June, the spreadsheet—with its 56 columns and 77 rows of data—was open on his computer. “It was a lot of good information,” he recalls. “I would have had a hard time doing that myself.”

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