

# PUBLIC NOTICES IN THE PAPER

Some Minnesota lawmakers want to place public notices only on government Web sites. That should raise concerns for anyone who questions government's accountability.



**W**hen people think of their local newspaper as the government watchdog, they think of strong, accurate reporting and probing editorials.

But there's another way community newspapers make government accountable, and it's usually found near the back of the paper. It's the public notices.

Public notices — which, among other things, inform readers about school board and county budgets, mortgage foreclosures, and whether property is to be rezoned — are an integral part of community newspapers.

And they're a well-read part of the paper. A 2003 telephone survey of Minnesotans by A & A Research of Kalispell, Mont., found that 90 percent of those polled believe cities, counties, townships and school boards "should be required to publish public notices in newspapers."

Many people might not think of public notices as journalism, but that doesn't mean public notices are not important. Anything that keeps news about government business — which is actually the people's business — in front of newspaper readers is important to democracy.

Unfortunately, a quiet campaign by some elected officials is trying to undermine Minnesotans' desire to have this valuable information published in the newspaper. At the State Capitol, some lawmakers believe the public interest would be better served if public notices were published only on government Web sites. These lawmakers promote their intentions by maintaining they want to repeal "unnecessary mandates." They argue that the cost of government must be better controlled, and eliminating the cost of publishing public notices in newspapers is one way to do that.

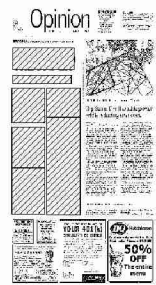
We respect their desire to reduce costs. But we also think taxpayers will be appalled to know that some lawmakers consider newspaper public notices as "unnecessary."

Newspapers — which are totally independent of government — are far more accessible to Minnesotans than any government Web site. They also are more accountable to the public as a neutral and independent party.

## Many would be disenfranchised

Despite the proliferation of computers, many Minnesotans don't have access to the Internet. Demographic research from the Pew Research Center in 2006 showed that:

- Americans age 65 or older would be adversely affected if public notices were only put online. Seventy-eight percent of people in that age group get their news from newspapers,



while only 12 percent look to the Internet for news. This age group also is the most likely to follow politics, and thus are the most likely to take advantage of public notices.

■ Minorities would be adversely affected. African-Americans (56 percent) and Hispanics (52 percent) are below the national average in Internet penetration.

■ Households with the lowest incomes would be adversely affected. Ninety-four percent of citizens earning \$75,000 per year are Internet users, but only 54 percent of those making less than \$30,000 use the Internet. The newspaper is affordable to all income levels. The cost of receiving the Leader for one month is less than \$5. The cost of Internet service, not including the computer and software, starts at \$10 a month.

## Where's the accountability?

Even if everyone visited the Internet on a regular basis, there's no assurance that public bodies' Web sites will be consistently reliable, available or secure. Newspapers are published on a regular schedule, and virtually always publish notices correctly.

Public notices are published by an independent party to protect democracy. If a scheduled public notice is not published or contains false information, newspapers are more likely to catch the mistake. Newspapers are the experts.

Public notices also must be authenticated by the publisher. Again, that independent verification is a newspaper's role, not the government's.

And in Minnesota, if people want to read public notices online, they can find those notices on their community newspaper's Web site. Public notices are required to be there by law.

Government officials who no longer want community newspapers to publish public notices should look at the value of newspapers overall. Would they prefer that newspapers not publish their news releases free of charge? Would they prefer to place those news releases only on a government Web site?

We don't think so.

Public notices are equally important as news releases. They belong in newspapers.