

Can government hold itself accountable?

►► BEND IN THE RIVER

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I continue to marvel — and not in a good way — at the assumption that the world is going all digital, that everybody wants their information to come to them in only one way: via the Internet.

Most recently, this manifested itself in a notice I got from the Minnesota Newspaper Association.

Local government lobbying groups are pushing state legislators to alter the state's already weak public information laws to allow them post public notices on their Web sites.

There are so many arguments against this that I'm not sure where to start.

The basics: Not everyone has a computer or is on the Internet. Yet the implication of this change is that it somehow still meets the requirement of the law that a notice of government's action or intended action gets out to everyone interested.

The ethics: Of course, no one in government ever takes advantage of their position, so there couldn't be any possible way that advantage could be taken of posting a public notice on a local government's Web site, right? Publishing notices in a newspaper

prevents local government from controlling the flow, controlling whether it's changed after initial publication and from deciding when it shows up. Those are important checks on local government power that shouldn't be ceded.

The reliability: We've seen how much attention our local government has paid to its Web site — not nearly enough. Do we really want something as important as making sure people are aware of government process in the hands of, well, government? What happens when the site crashes?

The oversight: Currently, there are no standards to go along with how these notices would be posted on local government's Web sites. On the other hand, there are numerous statutory requirements on newspapers for publishing notices, both in the paper and online. In fact, these are so well documented that courts routinely accept public notices as evidence in court, and requirement for some court actions.

I'm not suggesting that publishing in the newspaper alone is the answer, since not everyone subscribes. But I am suggesting that putting control of where they are published into the hands of the very entity that public notices are intended to hold accountable is a dangerous precedent indeed.

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