

## Let's keep notices 'public'

There's so much going on in government it's hard to keep track. So if you haven't heard about this, I wouldn't be surprised.

An effort by lobbyists that could have a major impact on the newspaper industry, would put you in the dark.

It can lead to a slippery slope and I'd like you to be aware of it.

The state legislature is being lobbied to no longer require city councils, school boards and county boards to publish public notices in the newspapers. Instead, those government entities would put the notices on their own websites.

Now, this may not seem like a big deal. But allow me to point out some drawbacks to this approach.

First, let's start with the fact that not everyone has access to the Internet, let alone a computer (in particular, the elderly, low-income families and minorities).

Does the government really think people are going to go to the library every week and search all the government websites to find out information about their city, school and county governments?

While you may be a wiz on the computer, there are still plenty of people who don't know how to turn on a computer, let alone search the Internet.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that only 55 percent of farmers have Internet access (with the majority of them having dialup).

How will people find out about meetings? Or zoning changes? Or requests for bid?

If you do want to search those entities online, you can find all the public notices on our website (all in one location). We're legally obligated to post them.

And what happens if that government website shuts down or doesn't function properly?

We've been publishing the Times for over 116 years and we've never missed an issue.

Second, newspapers are totally independent from government. Having an independent source publish the information establishes a permanent record, one that cannot be changed or manipulated after the fact.

Public notices belong out in the open, not locked inside a government web site. This is where the slippery slope starts.

The proposals the Legislature is considering have no standards on how governments should post the public notices (and no penalties for failing to do so). So, where's the incentive to get it right?

We, as newspapers and independent bodies, have extensive requirements for how to disseminate the legal notices.

Even back in 1789, the country's founders knew how important this was. They ordered that every bill, order, resolution or vote be published in at least three public newspapers.

I realize the government wants to cut costs, but the public's right to have access to information should not be cut.

You've probably seen the county's delinquent tax list. That's revenue the county needs and publication of that list encourages people to pay their taxes to avoid seeing their name in the paper.

Are you going to remember to check the county's website for that delinquent tax list?

And what about some of the smaller cities? The cities of Bock and Foreston, for example, don't even have websites. Has the Legislature considered that?

Some will argue that the Internet is free. I'll tell you, it's not. You have to purchase a computer and then pay a monthly fee for an Internet connection.

Yes, it's true the newspaper costs money. But at 75 cents an issue (less if you purchase a subscription), we're a much more affordable option.

And all those notices are in one location, delivered to your door each week.

Not to mention, the government entities will have to pay for their time, software and other equipment necessary to keep those public notices posted.

And what will happen to them over time? Will you be able to access something that was published five years ago?

Our newspaper is a historical archive.

Last week was Sunshine Week, which is about preserving and protecting access to government information and meetings. Let's keep the sun shining on government so we know what's going on. It's the best way to make sure the public has access to what is rightfully ours - public information.

Contact your Legislators and let them know you want public notices kept in your community newspaper.

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