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Legislative Update

REPORT FROM THE CAPITOL

The challenges presented by a short legislative session are in full evidence this week, with the first committee deadline almost upon us. All bills must be heard and approved in at least one policy committee of the House or Senate by this Friday, March 12. As a result legislators, lobbyists, and interested members of the public are scrambling to cover all of the bases.

Our priority this week is HF 3478, an education bill that proposes to modify or eliminate a number of “mandates” imposed on public school districts. Among them are several public notices that they are required to publish. The author of the bill is Rep. John Benson (DFL-Minnetonka), who apparently is claiming that allowing school districts to disseminate the notices only on their Web sites will produce significant savings.

But it’s a somewhat peculiar argument, because virtually all of the affected notices would be published only rarely--for example, the requirement that before a public schoolhouse may be closed, the school board must conduct a public hearing and publish a notice of the hearing. Consequently, the net savings that would be produced if the bill were enacted in its present form would seem to be almost negligible.

At the same time, however, the notices targeted by the bill deal with significant issues. They involve statutes addressing some of the most important actions that school boards can take, which is why a number of them call for public hearings and corresponding published notices of those hearings. It is by now a well-established fact that the Web is hardly the most effective way in which to distribute information of interest or consequence to the general public, a point that has even more validity with respect to Web sites operated by governmental bodies. The main argument we are therefore conveying to legislators is not based on monetary concerns, but on the potential loss of public awareness about important actions by public schools.

The bill is scheduled to be heard Tuesday night in the House K-12 Education Finance Division. MNA representatives will be there to testify. We do appreciate all the help that we’ve received over the past few days from MNA members in contacting members of the committee, and in providing valuable information about publication expenditures by school districts.

We also continue to work hard on the bill that would create a new and (we believe) far more effective procedure for enforcing the requirements of the Data Practices Act. The House version of the bill (HF 2899) was approved last week by the State and Local Government Committee, and now moves to the Civil Justice Committee, where it will probably be heard yet this week. Although the bill continues to attract a steady stream of proposed amendments, it still appears to have good momentum. In the Senate, the bill’s (SF 2354) next stop is the Judiciary Committee.

Another public records bill scheduled to be heard this week is causing us some concern, though it’s too early to tell what the bill’s prospects might be this session. SF 2790 would seriously dilute the long-standing presumption that legal records pertaining to juveniles 16 or older who are accused of felony-level offenses must be open to the public. The bill is on the agenda of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday, March 11. We will be there to express our concerns.

If you have any questions or issues about our legislative efforts, please be sure to let us know. You may contact Central Office or MNA attorney Mark Anfinson.

Next week is Sunshine Week

Use the [MNA Web site](#) for resources for your newspaper.

The applications are coming fast and furious for the Pohlads summer internship programs.

It's easy to enroll, but you must follow one basic rule: You must [download the enrollment form](#) from the MNA Web site, fill it out and fax it or e-mail it to MNA. That is the only way to assure that you are enrolled in the program. After the form is received by MNA, you will receive a confirmation e-mail.

If you have enrolled, and have not received a confirmation e-mail, contact Barbara Trebisovsky at barbara@mna.org, 612-278-0240 or 800-279-2979. Do the same with any questions.

Summer is coming fast!

API, Poynter to help downsized newsrooms - find new resources

- Are you concerned about maintaining **editorial quality** in the wake of massive cutbacks?
- Do you wonder if it's actually possible to **grow audience** with a shrinking news staff?
- Are you exploring ways to expand your resources by **collaborating** with other news organizations?

If so, then you'll want to attend [Beyond the Newsroom](#), a 2.5-day seminar that will be held March 22-24 in Reston, Va.

Click [HERE](#) for the News Release.

Survey: Newspaper Web Sites Still Top Source for Local Info But Competition is Closing In

More people go to newspapers' Web sites for complete local information than any other source, according to a new survey from the Newspaper Association of America and comScore. Of the more than 3,000 adults surveyed, 57% chose newspaper Web sites as the top source for local information.

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TRADE WIND

Bill Lawrence, 70, an award-winning editor, died March 2. Lawrence was editor and owner of the *Native American Press/Ojibwe News* since 1988. His journalism investigations earned Lawrence a 2003 Freedom of Information Award from the Society of Professional Journalists.