

Keep public notices in local newspapers

Hard economic times and tight agency budgets are not justifiable excuses to pull public notices from local newspapers.

But that's exactly the card some local government lobbying groups in St. Paul are trying to play at this very moment.

It's not a new argument.

Indeed, a quiet campaign by such lobbying groups and some elected officials, state and national, to ditch the requirement for putting public notices in local newspapers has been under way for years, usually pitched under the guise of saving taxpayers money. That argument has risen to the forefront of debate this year in the wake of slashed state aid to local governments and all-around hard times.

Their argument goes something like this:

Forcing townships, cities, counties and school boards to publish legal notices and board minutes in the newspaper is too expensive, especially when such notices could be posted on the Internet for free.

The argument is riddled with weak points.

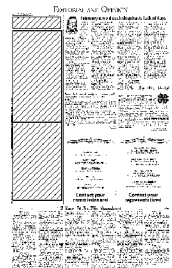
It may be free for the government agency, once that agency has paid hosting fees, Web design fees and IT support personnel salaries, but access to a site certainly is not. Computers and access are expenses beyond the means of a number of citizens. A dollar for a copy of this newspaper or a trip to the local library to read one is not.

While some local government lobbying groups often argue on the basis of expense alone, they rarely consider other repercussions associated with allowing public notices to leave the pages of the newspaper and head to the Web alone.

The matter of historical record is one.

Legal notices — such things as what the county or school budget is or whether property is going to be rezoned or developed — become historic record by virtue of being published in newspapers. Newspapers are bound into volumes by the year, collected by historical societies, recreated on microfiche, stored on computer disks. Online archives kept by public employees have no such tradition, if any.

Another is maintaining the newspaper's role as



watchdog. While all meetings are open to the public, most people do not take the time to attend them unless they have a specific agenda or reason. Instead, most citizens expect to learn about their city, county and school board actions through the articles and legal notices in their local newspapers.

One final argument against pulling public notices from the newspaper is the most important: The public wants to keep public notices in their newspaper.

Survey after survey after survey finds the vast majority of the public feel that local government agencies should be required to publish public notices in newspapers. One survey by A & A Research found 90 percent of Minnesota adults believe in this requirement and 92 percent believe keeping the public informed of such government activities is a “worthwhile expenditure of funds.”

The survey also showed that 88 percent of Minnesota adults read public notices in their local newspapers and the vast majority of those questioned wanted the system to go on as usual, rating the continued publishing of public notices in newspapers as “very important or important.”

This newspaper, along with the Minnesota Newspaper Association and the National Newspaper Association, will advocate for continuation of public notice requirements in newspapers and oppose any move on the part of the state Legislature to overturn or weaken current reporting standards.

It isn't about saving money. It's about losing a freedom. We — along with newspapers around the state, including the Cook County News Herald and Ortonville Independent, both of which contributed to this editorial — will be watching to see that doesn't happen, at least not without one very big and loud fight.

