

## Keep local government notices in newspapers

Once again, an effort is being made to move the workings of government out of the public's eye — to shroud it in secrecy in hopes no one will notice what they have lost.

Faced with a huge state budget shortfall, and a resulting loss of state aid, local governments are again pushing the Minnesota Legislature to remove public notice requirements from newspapers. They want to transfer them to their own Web sites.

We don't apologize for our self-interest in this matter because it is in the self-interest of every citizen that a permanent record be established of government actions and that it be publicized in a way that a majority of citizens are likely to see it. The Internet still doesn't come close to matching the local newspaper in that regard. There are billions of Web sites, but in most cases there is only one local newspaper.

How permanent is the Internet? If a public notice is posted on-line, what happens if the hard drive crashes? What guarantees are there that the public will see the notice? If a notice of a hearing is by law supposed to be posted for three weeks in advance of the hearing, if the Web site goes down for an hour or even for five minutes, won't it be a violation of the law to go ahead with the hearing? Who will miss the notice because of a computer glitch?

Further, if government alone is monitoring what is included in public notices, why should anyone expect the government to be accountable? Errors of omission would be the easiest to commit. And the public will never know what they have missed other than when they discover that the government is no longer keeping them informed. This is a self-governing nation,

and we cannot govern ourselves if we allow the public to become uninformed. Putting public notices in newspapers creates a permanent record that can't be altered by some hacker — a record reliable enough to be admissible in a court of law.

With the growth of the Internet, we understand the importance of being on-line with information, but the questions remain where is that Web site, and who is going to see it? State law already requires that newspapers put on-line all public notices that are published in their print editions. Newspaper Web sites in many instances have the highest traffic volume of any Web site in a county.

The fact also remains that many thousands of Minnesotans can and will read a newspaper, but do not have access to a computer and the Internet. Some citizens are frightened by technology, but even those that aren't may be unable to afford a computer, which costs in the neighborhood of \$500 for the hardware and \$20 per month for Internet service. Newspapers may be free, like this one, or cost only a fraction of Internet service for a paid subscription.

We shouldn't require people to go to the library or city hall to go online. They shouldn't have to have electrical service to know about the workings of government. It should be the government's responsibility to publish their annual financial activity in a newspaper, to tell the public how their tax dollars are being spent — and to do it through a permanent, reliable medium, your local newspaper. It's elitist to think that posting public notices on obscure government Web sites instead of in newspapers will not shut off access to governmental information to thousands of Minnesotans.

