

Bill sets new standards for newspaper legal notice publication

By Staff Reports

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The Alabama Senate voted unanimously on Feb. 16 to pass a Cam Ward-sponsored bill setting legal notice fee guidelines for Alabama newspapers of record.

Government entities are required by law to publish notices advertising items such as home foreclosures, abandoned vehicles and bid notices in a newspaper of record circulated in their county.

Ward, a Republican who represents Chilton County, said his bill was a compromise between the Alabama Press Association and a recent movement to allow government entities to only publish their notices online.

“There was a push last year that would have allowed an agency to post notices online only, and I was against that,” Ward said. “Only 40 percent of people in Alabama have Internet access, so that would have disenfranchised a lot of people in the state.

“Some newspapers are already publishing their notices online, but a lot of them aren’t,” Ward said, noting the bill requires newspapers to publish legal notices on a statewide website, such as Alabamalegals.com, and on the newspaper’s website.

State Rep. Mike Hill, R-Columbiana, sponsored a similar bill in the Alabama House of Representatives. Hill’s bill currently is pending action in the House of Representatives Committee on State Government.

If it is passed by the Alabama House of Representatives and signed into law, the bill would require a newspaper to charge government entities no more than the paper charges its other commercial customers for a similar-size notice, and also requires the newspaper to publish all legal notices online at no extra charge.

“The printer... must make affidavit to the entity required to publish the legal notice that the sum charged does not exceed the lowest classified rate paid by commercial customers for an advertisement of similar size and frequency in the same newspapers in which the public notice appears,” read the bill.

Ward said by requiring newspapers to charge their lowest rate to entities bound by law to publish legal notices, it cuts down on the “potential of price gouging” by newspapers.

-Story by Neal Wagner, Shelby County Reporter