

Experts: Legal-ads bill won't help N.J. towns

TRENTON — A bill to eliminate requirements on publishing legal ads in newspapers will cost towns more money, kill jobs and muddy transparency in local and state government, media industry experts say.

The bill also could disadvantage elderly and low-income residents who rely on newspapers. A study last year by Scarborough Research, a media research firm, showed 63 percent of the state's elderly and 58 percent of low-income residents did not go online over a 30-day period.

Supporters say the bill would save governments \$70 million a year. But the New Jersey Press Association said the ads cost \$20 million — \$8 million from government.

George White, the NJPA's executive director, said the bill would make residents comb multiple town websites for information, and it would not save money.

"The business of legal public notifications has a lot of nuance and complexities that they don't have the websites to properly administer," he said today, noting townships may have to take on additional costs and personnel.

Richard Vezza, publisher of The Star-Ledger, said the measure was more about politicians obstructing the press than saving money.

"The only reason that I can come up with is that they either want to get even with newspapers or they want to limit access to public information," Vezza said today.

State lawmakers previously tabled the bill (S2072), but Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver (D-Essex) and Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) approved posting it late Friday afternoon in a bid to pass the measure Monday, when the current legislative session ends.

If approved, the bill would make it optional for state, county and municipal governments to place legal advertisements — such as contract bids and tax sales — in newspapers, provided they post them on their own websites.

An original bill sponsor, Assemblyman Al Coutinho (D-Essex), has withdrawn his sponsorship, noting "it would have a crippling effect on small community papers."