

Legal ads should be in papers

THE ISSUE: A legislative committee will take a look at a proposal to move legal notices from newspapers to the Web.

WE BELIEVE: That is a waste of time and money. It has been shown that having legals in papers is the best way to keep the people informed.

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One of the major themes of Sunshine Week is the power of information.

Armed with public records and the ability to attend open meetings, the people of this nation are better able to take part in their government and to judge the work of the people they put into office.

Some argue that in this representative democracy, citizens should step back after voting and let elected officials do their jobs. There is no need, or so this argument goes, for robust public access laws. Let these officials work, even in secret if necessary, and then judge them by the results.

But that is naïve. How do citizens assess officials' efforts if they can't see them? And history shows that some unwatched officials tend to stray from the straight and narrow.

Which brings us to legal notices.

A move is afoot to take this information in meeting minutes, bidding notices, payments of bills, etc. in from newspapers in Wyoming and onto the Internet. The argument is that they will be better used if they are on the Web. Lawmakers will look at this before next year's session.

But there are a number of flaws in this approach:

-Studies show that 80 percent of Wyoming's adults read a newspaper at least once a week. That compares to the 56 percent who use the Internet.

-More than 25 percent of state residents say they read public notices in their papers regularly.

-Newspapers make notices more readily available. Anyone reading a paper is likely to see a legal. On the Internet, users would have to want to find them in and know where to go.

-In terms of archiving, papers have longer lives than do Web pages. Indeed, state residents can find legals in papers as far back as 1887, and there have been court cases in which papers were submitted as evidence that a governmental body published a notice. There is no guarantee of such durability on the Web.

-Print cannot be altered. It is easy to imagine hackers playing games with digital legal notices.

-It is wise to have a third party in charge of publishing and storing public information. Government posting and archiving legals would be like the fox guarding the henhouse.

Faced with these arguments, proponents of moving legals to the Web might try to say that publishing them is an expensive waste of tax dollars.

Yes, it does cost governments to publish these items. But the outlays are minimal. Indeed, a review of budgets in Wyoming shows that governments on average spend less than one-tenth of 1 percent of their revenues on public notices.

One more point: If lawmakers truly want to see legals on the Web, they will discover it already is being done by the Wyoming Press Association at wyopublicnotices.com. The WPA runs legals that have appeared in the state's newspapers at no additional cost to government.

Faced with all of this, one has to wonder why lawmakers want to waste their time doing this interim study. But study they will. Here's hoping that they will stay focused on goals similar to that of Sunshine Week: to arm the public to be the best citizens they can be.