

EDITORIAL: N.J. Legislature prepares to kill public-notice advertising

The New Jersey Legislature has waited until the last day of the current session — Monday — to dust off dormant Assembly and Senate bills that would allow government entities to post public notices on their own websites instead of requiring them to be advertised in general-circulation newspapers.

In an 11th-hour maneuver — the bills were posted just before 5 p.m. Friday — lawmakers are looking to deliver a sucker punch to the right-to-know cause and a major hit to the bottom line of newspapers.

Full disclosure: Newspapers will lose advertising revenues and shed hundreds of jobs in New Jersey if this measure passes tomorrow. Yet that loss pales in comparison to the one taxpayers will suffer when an invaluable commodity in a democracy — access to information — gets squeezed more tightly by public officials. We're talking about meeting notices, zoning appeals, budgets, requests for bids and other listings that governments are required to post in newspapers.

Shifting those items to government-run websites will require many governments to upgrade (or create) websites, beef up security and keep them up to date. That costs money. It also will send citizens, contractors and others in search of multiple websites. Newspapers in New Jersey (and Pennsylvania) use one centralized website to post all their legal ads.

In February, legislators in Trenton heard from open-government advocates and newspaper reps, who testified against this change. Among other things, people who lack internet access, including many older taxpayers, would be shut out.

Back in February, legislative leaders listened and declined to call for a vote. So what has changed, other than the opportunity to slip a bill through without a lot of public notice? If anyone needs an illustration of the need for advance public advertising and full airing of critical government actions ... here's exhibit A.

Similar legislation in Pennsylvania has been introduced, discussed and put aside — but it keeps coming back, like a bad penny.

We urge Warren and Hunterdon residents to contact their legislators now — time is running short — and voice support for transparency in government.