

Public and legal notices bills hit the Florida Legislature this year in separate waves.

Fortunately one bill, as Dean Ridings, president and CEO of the Florida Press Association said, is “effectively dead” and the good one, in a House and Senate version, is moving forward.

HB 149 would have removed the requirement to put public notices about foreclosures in newspapers, instead requiring postings only on government web sites. That would have meant that the public’s access in the convenience of their newspaper and its free online access would have been removed. State Sen. Steve Wise, R-Jacksonville, sponsored the Senate companion bill which also appears dead.

While HB 149 would have saved some money on advertising by public agencies, it had grave unintended consequences. It would have cut off the public’s ability to find these notices given that foreclosures are almost daily filings in the state. It is important that people know about these potential proceedings especially if they are involved and cannot be reached any other way to receive notice.

It was an odd proposal for the Florida Legislature to consider in the state that basks in its Sunshine and Public Records laws and constitutional right of access to the public’s business. We hope this issue stays dead.

The good one, HB 937, is still alive. So is its Senate companion, SB 292. That is good news. “The good public notice bills,” according to Ridings, “increase the effectiveness of public notices using newspapers and their websites.” They have met with support in various committees so far. State Rep. Ritch Workman, R-Melbourne, sponsor of HB 937, has come around. Previously, according to Ridings, Workman wanted to eliminate the requirement that they be published in newspapers. But Ridings said Workman and Sen. Michael Bennett, R-Sarasota, SB 292’s sponsor, are working with the Press Association to get a bill passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott.

Public notices in newspapers and on newspaper websites protect the public’s right to know what is going on. They let the public know about pending decisions that will be discussed in public meetings in some instances such as land development proposals. They often are the only place

where the public will learn of a pending land use change. They ensure general notification to a wide audience affected by such proposals.

While it costs money to advertise in newspapers, the bills also mandate reduced advertising cost on multiple publications of the same notice, and free access to notices on the Internet. The St. Augustine Record and most Florida newspapers already offer their legal notices online for free.

We favor as much public notice as possible of pending actions of governmental boards and commissions. Free public notices online play a major role in that guaranteed right of public access. It has been proven that when the public turns out, decisions are made with more knowledge of the public's impact.

We thank Rep. Ritch Workman and Sen. Michael Bennett for protecting the public's access through newspapers and online newspaper websites. Without public notices, the public's access and impact on decision making might not happen otherwise.