

Green Valley News and Sun, Editorial—Our View: Can you trust your government? (3.20.12)

An interesting question that we heard asked on more than one occasion as we attended hearings earlier this year as the House Committee on Technology & Infrastructure considered a bill that would have eliminated publication of all public notices in not only the Herald/Review, but in every newspaper in the state.

Introduced and written by the chairman of the committee, Rep. David Stevens (R-Sierra Vista), the hearings on the bill (HB2403) took place over four weeks. On the last day for it to be passed out of committee, members voted 5-2 against forwarding the bill to a full House vote. Those voting to defeat the bill were: Democrats Bruce Wheeler and Sally Ann Gonzales and Republicans Jeff Dial, Carl Seel and Terri Proud.

Can you trust your government?

Last legislative session, Sen. Andy Biggs (R-Gilbert) put forth legislation to eliminate public notices, as he had done nearly every year for the past five or six. Every time, his fellow legislators voted against the proposal. However, Biggs, with the approval of newspaper representatives and others, did get a resolution passed to form a Public Notice Study Committee, which was to gather all the stakeholders to examine this complicated issue.

Most of us in the newspaper industry considered this a positive step.

Alas, after the legislative session adjourned, no study committee meetings were scheduled. Finally in the last weeks of December 2011, Biggs called his committee to hear testimony. Besides statements from newspapers and some government agencies, Rep. Stevens also made some comments to the committee.

This cursory and hasty process did little in our minds to make significant progress on this important issue. And, to date, Biggs' group has yet to issue a report — although it is supposed to be nearing publication.

Can you trust your government?

Having been defeated in his own committee this year, Rep. Stevens turned to a legislative gimmick by introducing a “strike-all” amendment to a Senate bill.

What is that? From the Arizona Legislative website: “A ‘strike everything after the enacting clause’ amendment … proposes to delete the entire text of the existing bill and substitute new language, essentially making it a completely different bill, possibly on an entirely different subject. These amendments are sometimes used to allow legislators to circumvent the deadlines on introduction of new legislation, deal with an issue that arises after the deadline or revive a bill that has previously been defeated.”

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What does the new bill do? It calls for public notices to be published in those newspapers with the “most audience” and to the best “targeted” audience. On the surface, it would seem this will force most public notices into the state’s largest newspapers. That would hurt smaller, rural newspapers across the state. It would likely cost those placing public notices in newspapers more money since higher circulation newspapers charge more due to their audience reach.

It also would require newspapers to send all published public notices to the Arizona Department of Administration. That agency would then become responsible for setting up, maintaining and handling an online database of notices. The Arizona Newspapers Association has been operating such a database for more than eight years, at www.publicnoticeads.com, at no cost to the state.

The proposal would add to the bureaucracy of state government. Its establishment would cost taxpayers money. Its ongoing maintenance and software upgrades would do so as well. ADA officials testified against the bill at the Senate committee hearing.

Rep. Russ Jones (R-Yuma), a member of the aforementioned public notice study committee, testified against the bill, urging instead to wait until that committee’s report was published.

The sole person speaking in favor of the bill was Rep. Stevens. It passed out of the Senate committee on a 4-2 vote and is now headed to the Senate floor.

Can you trust your government?

This scattered, shotgun approach to a serious issue now moves forward to a full Senate vote — supposedly as early as this week.

We urge you to contact State Sen. Gail Griffin (R-Sierra Vista) and State Sen. Frank Antenori (R-Tucson) and urge them to vote no on HB2412.

Can you trust your government?

We don’t like the question. Certainly there are many honorable, intelligent, hardworking representatives throughout local, state and federal levels of government. Many of them listen to their constituents, take in information from as many sources as they can and then make their best and informed decisions.

Let us hope the senators from our part of the state can be trusted to do the right thing.

Sen. Antenori can be contacted at: fanteriori@azleg.gov or call 602-926-5683

Sen. Griffin can be contacted at: ggriffin@azleg.gov or call 602-926-5895.

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