

The Modesto Bee, Plan would keep public notices from public vision (6.25.12)

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In Modesto, and in newspapers across the country, public notice advertisements have become largely identified with foreclosed properties. That is especially the case in Modesto, where nearly one in nine homes have been lost to foreclosure in the past few years.

Along with foreclosure listings, however, public notice ads include fictitious business name statements, notice of applications to sell alcoholic beverages, name changes, unpaid tax announcements and probate petitions identifying executors of estates.

A critical piece of the continued transparency and public involvement in our community are notices from cities and counties announcing bid openings or requests for work. Government institutions must follow strict and well-defined processes when soliciting work, ensuring every interested party has a fair chance to compete.

Gloriette Genereux, Modesto's director of finance, has put a proposal on tonight's Modesto City Council agenda that would effectively halt widespread announcements of specific bidding processes through the public notice process by ceasing their required publication in the local newspaper — in this case The Modesto Bee.

Genereux states that public notice ads have become "an ineffective way of announcing formal bids as they pre-date the Internet as the most effective means of communication with the prospective vendor pool."

Alternatively, Genereux recommends that such notices be placed on a "bidding website," that, in her estimation, reaches "far more potential bidders than subscribe to the official newspaper."

While the city doesn't share its own statistics for comparative purposes, according to a recent third-party audit, The Modesto Bee reaches 239,437 readers per week in print alone. When combined with the online audience at modbee.com — where public notices are also posted — that number rises to 255,002. Nearly 6 out of 10 adults in the Stanislaus County region read The Bee each week. It is hard to imagine that a larger number of local residents visit the city's web site.

This proposal has been presented by Genereux as contributing to "innovative and accountable city government." In reality, it erodes the principle of an accountable city government while saving the city a paltry (compared to their multi-million dollar annual budget) \$6,000 per year.

This isn't just about The Bee or \$6,000 in annual savings. It is about a public notice process that has been carefully crafted in California to ensure that adjudicated newspapers like The Modesto Bee — those which are sanctioned to run such notices and have made substantial investments in their community — are viewed as a trusted and reliable source of information.

The proposal to the council erodes the public's right to participate in local government opportunities, reduces the the public's oversight afforded by publication in a newspaper and should be unanimously rejected by the council.
