

Preserve public's access to information on sheriff's sales5 CommentsEmailPrint

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At a time when, unfortunately, the number of foreclosures and sheriff's sales are increasing, there are at least a few senators in the Ohio General Assembly who want to make the process of a sheriff's sale less transparent.

State Sen. Bill Coley, a Butler County Republican, is sponsor of Senate Bill 234, which would allow the public notice of a sheriff's sale to be displayed on a government website, rather than in a newspaper of general circulation in the county where the sale would take place.

We'll acknowledge that as a newspaper we have an obvious dog in this fight. But it is folly to pretend that a greater number of Ohioans would be served by posting a foreclosure sale on a government website rather than have it published in a newspaper.

It should also be obvious that it is not in the best interests of Ohioans to embark on a journey that would eventually replace independent sources of public notices — such as newspapers — with government-run websites.

Obviously the ways in which people use the Internet is evolving, and growing, and most newspapers — this one included — have been adapting to that reality. But an independent press is vital to a democracy, and providing public notices of what the government is doing through general-circulation vehicles is a part of maintaining that independence.

By law, Ohio newspapers already make public notice advertising available to government entities at the lowest rates charged by those papers. That apparently isn't good enough for Sen. Coley, who candidly states that he doesn't read public notices in his hometown paper. Perhaps members of the General Assembly, who have greater access to laptop computers and handheld devices than the average Ohioan, are more Internet savvy than many or even most of their constituents.

But research sponsored by the Ohio Newspaper Association as recently as last May shows that Ohio citizens want and expect public notices to be in newspapers.

Matter of interest

As far as the notice of sheriff's sales goes, obviously these are of interest to a broader public than just those who would bid on a particular property. People want to know if a house on their street, or two houses three streets over are going on the block before a sign pops up in the front yard or cars carrying bidders start parking on the street.

And, from a marketing standpoint, the more notice people have of a sale, the more likely it is that more people will show up to bid. And more bidders are good for everyone.

S.B. 234 is a bill that should die because it has no purpose other than to limit the ways in which people can be informed about a matter in which they have an interest. There is no reason why sheriff's sales can't be added to a government website if the local government has one. There is even less reason, though, to replace general circulation of such public notices with the limited circulation available to fewer people on a government-run site.