

Public notices should be public

Nov 28, 2011 (The Virginian-Pilot - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- For years, the Virginia Press Association has fought some legislators' efforts to change the state law that requires localities to buy space in newspapers for legal advertisements. Those efforts frequently were viewed as more self-serving than critical to keeping the public informed about what government's doing and when it's doing it.

A recent survey commissioned by VPA should start to change that. If nothing else, it provides clear evidence that government's investment in print advertising isn't a waste of precious resources; it's a practice actually favored by a majority of Virginians. And they don't want it to stop.

Legislative proposals in recent years have tried but failed to save the state and localities money by allowing the posting of public notices and legal advertisements on government websites, where space is unlimited -- and navigation is often next to impossible.

There is likely to be a similar push to allow some foreclosure notices to be shifted to the Internet. That would also be a bad idea.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents in the VPA survey said they would be less likely to read public notices if they were required to visit government websites to view them. Yet 94 percent said "keeping the citizenry informed of public notices/legal advertisements in newspapers is an important function of government." Those figures argue that legislators may want to reconsider measures that would effectively permit government to operate with less transparency.

It's also worth noting that state data show more than one out of four Virginians still lacks daily access to the Internet, a fact that underscores the critical role that traditional media still plays. It's hard to visit a government website without Internet access.

Much hay has been made of newspapers' -- and traditional media's -- waning influence, especially by erstwhile successors and professional ax-grinders. But even in the digital age, the daily newspaper provides an unrivaled way for the public to know what their government is doing.

And it doesn't take 30 clicks to find it.

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