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Poll: Public wants notices in newspapers

Virginians overwhelmingly think it is important for government bodies to place public notices in newspapers, according to a new survey that will be used against attempts in the General Assembly to change public-notice requirements.

The public notices are formal announcements about government actions such as scheduled public hearings, proposed zoning changes, and requests for proposals that must be publicized as paid advertisements in newspapers.

The survey of 500 Virginians indicated that most support the requirement that government actions or proposals be publicized. It also indicated most people would read public notices less frequently and with less trust if they appeared on government websites, rather than in general circulation newspapers.

The survey was commissioned by the Virginia Press Association, an organization of more than 200 newspapers statewide.

The group has opposed legislation introduced in the General Assembly for several years that would change the requirements, allowing governments to post public notices on their websites or in public libraries without placing them as paid advertisements in a general circulation newspaper.

"There have been 12 bills over the last five years that have attempted to shift (public) notices out of newspapers," said Ginger Stanley, the VPA's executive director. "We thought that we needed the citizens of Virginia involved in this fight. It doesn't need to be just a Press Association argument anymore."

Stanley said the group is not opposed to posting public notices online, but believes that method should not replace publication in general circulation newspapers.

The legislation has failed in a House of Delegates committee in past General Assembly sessions, but its patrons have said they plan to keep introducing the measure.

Lawmakers who sponsored two bills in this year's General Assembly session, Del. R. Steven Landes, R-Augusta, and Del. Onzlee Ware, D-Roanoke, did not respond to telephone messages seeking comment Tuesday.

Among the findings of the survey:

63 percent of respondents said that they would read public notices much less often (36 percent) or less often (27 percent) if the notices were placed only on government websites.

Only 16 percent of respondents said that they would read public notices much more often (4 percent) or more often (12 percent) if the notices were placed only on government websites.

72 percent of respondents said they have not gone to a government website to read a public notice.

94 percent of respondents said that keeping the citizenry informed of public notices/legal advertisements in newspapers is an important function of government agencies.

The telephone survey was conducted Oct. 27 to Nov., 1 by DecideSmart, a research and strategy consulting firm. It has a margin of error of 4.4 percentage points.