

Virginia Press Association

KEEP THE LIGHT

ON PUBLIC NOTICES



FOR

THE WEEK OF NOVEMBER 14, 2011

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: PUBLIC NOTICE SURVEY RESULTS!

Embargo until November 16, 2011

Virginians strongly support the principle of the public's right to know.

Virginians believe it is important to place public notices in newspapers.

Virginians would read public notices less frequently and with less trust if these appeared only on government websites.

These are the key results of a recent survey, examining the views of 500 adult Virginians about the principle of the public's right to know and the placement of public notices, conducted by DecideSmart for the **Virginia Press Association (VPA)**.

The VPA, a longtime advocate for the public's right to know, commissioned the survey as an **independent method of gauging Virginians' support of the public's right to know** and their thoughts on the placement of public notices, which for more than 200 years have been published in newspapers.

A **public notice** is a formal announcement or warning that is legally required to be published as an

advertisement in a paid-circulation newspaper. It helps citizens learn about plans and actions that will impact them and their community. Public notices may be published for a variety of reasons, including business and licensing matters, public meetings, zoning, requests for proposals, local government matters and elections.

By publishing notices in newspapers, **government serves the public's right to know and maintains its own transparency.** Newspapers are a reliable, accessible form of circulating public notices to the public and provide an archival record of government actions.

Since early September, the VPA has been conducting a campaign, "**Keep the Light on Public Notices,**" to increase Virginians' awareness of public notices in newspapers.

Elected officials, however, have proposed taking public notices out of independent newspapers and posting them only on government websites, giving government control over what the public is allowed to know. Instead of reading notices in newspapers that are delivered on a regular schedule, citizens would have to search for notices on websites, a practice that would be even more difficult for those who lack computer access. The principles of the public's right to know and of government accountability to its citizens would be threatened.

The survey results, outlined below, demonstrate that Virginians are overwhelmingly committed to the principle of their right to know, expect government to act transparently, trust newspapers more than government websites as sources of information and would read public notices much less often if they appeared only on government websites.

Virginians are very committed to the principle of the public's right to know what their government is doing and planning.

- **97%** of the respondents in the survey said **that the principle of the public's right to know what their government is doing and planning is either very important (79%) or somewhat important (18%).**
- Only 3% of respondents reported that it is not so important (2%) or not important or not important at all (1%) to them.
- **94%** of respondents said that **keeping the citizenry informed of public notices/legal advertisements in newspapers is an important function of government agencies.**

Del. Riley E. Ingram (R-Hopewell), chairman of the House Committee on Counties, Cities and Towns, said, "The survey results strongly confirm my experience that Virginians expect the activities of government to be conducted openly, fairly and transparently. Virginians clearly have a deep commitment to the fundamental principles of democratic governance. Newspapers, both daily and weekly, continue to have a prominent role in the maintenance of these principles throughout Virginia's communities."

Virginians would read public notices less frequently if these were placed only on government websites.

- **63%** of respondents said that **they would read public notices much less often (36%) or less often (27%)** if these were placed only on government websites.
- Only 16% of respondents said that they would read public notices much more often (4%) or more often (12%) if these were placed only on government websites.
- **72%** of respondents **have not gone to a government website** to read a public notice.

Removing public notices and legal advertisements from newspapers would reduce citizens' public access to the workings of their government and would penalize small business owners across Virginia who depend upon community newspapers for fair access to contracting opportunities.

"I see any move to put all legal notices solely online as yet another impediment to maintaining (and dealing with the consequences of) an informed citizenry," said **Goochland County resident Linda Sasser.** "I depend on the weekly Goochland Gazette for information regarding the Board of Supervisors, Planning Commission, and other local and state regulatory agencies, their hearings, the public response window and so forth. The information is sometimes difficult to locate, but it is there and available to clip,

calendar, consider and respond to."

Virginians have more trust in public notices placed in newspapers than on government websites.

The survey asked respondents to rate the level of trust and credibility they had in public notices that appeared on government websites and those that appeared in newspapers.

- **52%** of respondents gave **public notices printed in newspapers one of the two highest ratings on the trust and credibility scale** compared to 31% of respondents who gave public notices printed on government websites one of the two highest ratings on the same scale. These results show that Virginians continue to understand that the newspapers serving their communities perform a very important role in providing independent verification and establishing a permanent record of the information that government provides citizens.

For additional information about the survey, please contact VPA Executive Director [Ginger Stanley](#) at 804-521-7575 or [Bob Holsworth, Ph.D.](#), of DecideSmart, 804-665-1180.

Methodology Statement: The results of the poll are based on landline telephone and cell phone interviews conducted October 27- November 1, 2011, of adult Virginians 18 years of age and over. Live interviewing and sampling was conducted by the Interviewing Service of America. The final number of completed surveys in the sample was 501 with a resulting margin of error of +/- 4.4%. The margin of error for the sub groups of registered and nonregistered voters is larger due to smaller sample sizes. In addition to sampling error, the other potential sources of error include non-response, question wording, and interviewer error. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. The poll was designed utilizing questions that had previously appeared on other state-based surveys and analyzed by Bob Holsworth, Ph.D., of DecideSmart.

THIS WEEK'S PUBLIC NOTICE CAMPAIGN RESOURCES:

New ads highlighting the survey results!

Print versions are available; please contact [Caroline Cardwell](#).

97%
of Virginians are very committed to the principle of the **public's right to know** what their governments are doing.

94%
of Virginians believe that keeping the public informed of public notices in **newspapers** is an important function of government agencies.

72%
of Virginians have **not** gone to a government website to read a public notice.

63%
of Virginians said that they would read public notices **much less often** if they were placed only on government websites.

Keep public notices in independent Virginia newspapers.

Virginia Press Association
KEEP THE LIGHT ON PUBLIC NOTICES

Because you have a right to know.

Source: Independent survey of Virginians conducted by DecideSmart, October 2011.

Why do we need public notices in Virginia newspapers?

Public notices tell you, as a citizen, **what is being done** by your government. State law requires actions of interest to you to be published in these notifications.

Public notices keep you **up to date** on what's happening with your city or county government, school board and other governmental agencies. Reading public notices helps you become a **more informed** citizen.

97% of Virginians said in a recent survey that they are very committed to the principle of the **public's right to know** what their government is doing and planning.

This newspaper **shares that commitment** to your right to know.

Keep public notices in independent Virginia newspapers.

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