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Bill Would End Public Notices in Newspapers

BY EVA MOORE

For the third year in a row, an Upstate lawmaker is pushing a bill that would let counties publish public notices on their websites rather than in newspapers.

Republican Rep. Wendy Nanney says her bill is about saving taxpayers money and improving access to information.

Under state law, counties are required to buy print ads announcing foreclosures, delinquent taxes, zoning hearings, county council and other public meetings, elections, tax increases and many other items of public interest. Nanney's bill would let counties advertise everything except elections on their websites instead of in a newspaper.

"Newspapers are declining," Nanney says, citing dropping circulation numbers for print newspapers. "I read my news online now. We no longer get the paper at the house."

But the head of the state's press association says people won't look on county websites to find important information — they'll look in a newspaper.

"You want to know if there's a strip club opening next to you — are you going to go on the website and see that? No, you'll see it in the newspaper," says Bill Rogers, executive director of the South Carolina Press Association, which is lobbying against the bill.

The association did a test two years ago, Rogers says, putting 200 unserved warrant announcements on the Darlington County Sheriff's Department website and 200 in the local newspaper.

"The paper outperformed the website 7 to 1," Rogers says. "That's pretty strong evidence that people read it in the newspaper who won't see it online."

But Nanney says the study might not have been fair, because people didn't know they should look online for that information.

"It will be a training process to get people to know where to go and look at it," she says.

Nanney says Greenville County could save close to \$1 million if the bill passes.

But when Free Times asked Richland County to estimate how much it spends on public notice advertising, staffers came up with a number just under \$20,000. That includes the budgeted amounts from the planning and zoning departments, procurement, Richland County Council and more.

"In the overall scheme of our budget, it certainly would be a cost savings, but not tremendous," says Stephany Snowden, the county's public information director.

She cautions that the estimate isn't exact, though.

City of Columbia staffers estimate they spend \$60,000 a year on public notices.

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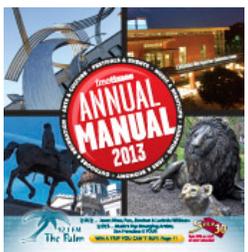
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While the bill under consideration would only apply to counties, Nanney says the Municipal Association of South Carolina has approached her about including municipalities, too.

The S.C. Association of Counties supports the bill, according to the Charleston Post and Courier, saying it would give counties more flexibility.

However, for Rogers, public notice in newspapers is also a matter of security and transparency.

"When you put it in a newspaper, it's printed and it's there, and it can't be changed or hacked," he says. "Online, who knows? 'Oh well, we forgot to put that notice up, we'll just put it up now.' Or 'Oh, we'll take it down.' All kinds of things can happen. Look what happened to the Department of Revenue," he says, recalling the theft in 2012 of millions of South Carolinians' personal and financial information from state computers.

The association has also suggested the end of public notice could shut down smaller newspapers across the state.

As the digital age advances, some states have revised their public notice laws, creating central online repositories for public notices or requiring newspapers that print public notices to run them online, too.

In Texas this week, the legislature is considering a bill similar to the one Nanney is proposing. The Dallas Morning News reports the bill is being fought by open government advocates in that state.

Nanney says she wasn't following the lead of another state when she wrote her bill.

The South Carolina Press Association claimed a small victory last week when Nanney's bill was sent to the Judiciary committee rather than getting a vote by the full House. Nanney says she should know this week when the committee plans to take up the bill for discussion.



Our Take

More people are getting their information online, and we support efforts to put more public notices online, too — but not at the expense of publishing them in print. Frankly, we sleep a lot better at night knowing local governments have to answer to an independent third party when it comes to notifying the public.

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