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### News

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## Lawmakers study legal notices in newspapers

The interim topic was reassigned after work began last year to address the issue.

By Trevor Brown  
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CHEYENNE -- Lawmakers are once again looking at changes to requirements that local governments publish legal and public notices in newspapers.

A legislative committee has been tasked with exploring the issue as an interim topic in the coming months.

Cities, towns and counties are required to publish a variety of public records in their local newspapers. Those include salary listings, notices of public meetings, requests for contract bids, bills and other information.

Localities, depending on their size, can spend tens of thousands of dollars a year on the mandated advertising costs.

Local government officials say they could save money if some of the notices could be published digitally instead of in the newspapers.

But press and open-government advocates argue this could limit the public's access to the information.

Lawmakers began discussing whether to loosen the requirements last year. But major changes were not pursued during the recent session. Instead, legislators asked for more time to look at the issue.

The Joint Corporations, Elections and Political Subdivisions Interim Committee was assigned the study. It recently asked press and local government groups to work together to see if they can find compromises.

The Wyoming Press Association will meet Wednesday with the Wyoming Association of Municipalities and the Wyoming County Commissioners Association to continue work that began last year.

Jim Angell, executive director of the Wyoming Press Association, said he hopes the groups look only at "minor tweaks" to current laws.

He said they likely can agree on some subjects, such as reducing the frequency that some types of notices must be published.

But he cautioned against sweeping changes, such as requiring that most notices be only published online. He said this would negatively affect the public's right to know about what its government is up to.

"These notices aren't just in there for giggles," he said. "They are requirements to help keep people informed about what is being done with their money and resources.

"(The ads) can call attention to which streets are being cleaned, what teacher salaries are or why a city council wants to close access to an alleyway."

Ron Harvey, vice president of the Wyoming County Commissioners Association, acknowledges the importance of publishing some of the notices in newspapers.

But he added that local governments want to see if they can save money by loosening selective requirements.

A commissioner in Washakie County, Harvey said his community spends about \$25,000 in advertising fees for the notices. Meanwhile, a larger community, such as Cheyenne, can spend about \$90,000 annually.

"With shrinking budgets, we need to look at the best ways to spend our money," Harvey said. "While that amount may not seem like a big amount in perspective (of the government's total budget), it is still taxpayer money, and we need to spend that as appropriately as possible."

He added that putting notices online can make them more accessible since they are searchable. He said residents also don't have to worry about losing the information if they throw

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searchable. He said residents also don't have to worry about losing the information if they throw away their paper if the notices are posted on a website.

But Angell said there are benefits publishing the notices in papers in addition to putting them online. He said newspapers function better as permanent historical records

"If I'm in Cheyenne, I can drive down to the State Museum and find legal notices dating back to 1958," he said. "Having that kind of lasting value to our historical records is invaluable."

Lawmakers instructed the press and local government groups to report back to the committee when it meets later this year.

Harvey said he expects the press and local government groups to find compromises that will be agreeable to both sides.



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