

MLive Media Group: Public notices bill threatens crucial check on government power

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By **MLive Media Group Editorial Board**
 on November 30, 2014 at 6:00 AM, updated December 01, 2014 at 3:55 PM

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Your local government has a lot of power. Public notices in The Ann Arbor News on Nov. 27, 2014.

It has the power to foreclose homes, make new laws that could land you in jail, and locate hazardous facilities on your block.

But before it can do any of these things, it must publish public notices of its intentions in a local newspaper of record. Third-party publishing ensures a healthy check on government authority.

Your state legislature, however, could take up **a bill** in December that would allow governments to publish legal notices only on their own websites. The bill would phase out the requirement for publishing in independent sources like newspapers.

This is a wrongheaded move. When a public notice is printed by a third party, it serves as proof of what government did, when it did it, how it did it and where citizens can learn more about the matter. Public notices inform citizens when their elected boards will meet, what they will talk about and how they plan to spend your tax dollars.

In litigation, courts require the original printed legal notice as proof, and for good reason: It can't be altered. Not so with online notices. Left unchecked, governments could quietly update notices to hide a mistake. Dates can be altered. Documents can disappear during a power outage.

It's true that many newspapers publish the notices online as well as in print, and that makes it easier for citizens to search and find. But when it comes to accuracy and proof, there is no substitute for the printed legal notice.

Supporters of the bill argue the move would save municipalities money, but the cost of these notices is minimal. The city of Niles, for example, spends more money each year for baseball umpires than for publishing its legal notices in the local newspaper.

Frankly, we should value checks and balances on government power more than baseball umpires.

Adding to the potential problems, many municipalities simply do not have user-friendly websites that would make finding this information easy for citizens. And in any case, citizens don't frequently go to government websites unless they are seeking specific information, just as they don't visit City Hall unless they have business to attend.

It was for this reason that public notices were required to be printed in major local newspapers in the first place. People read newspapers and news websites to get information about local goings-on that may affect them.

On government websites, government is in control of what you know. Citizens need an independent check and balance on the government that is supposed to serve them. Public notices in newspapers provide that.

Don't let government control what you know. Contact your **state representative** and **senator** and tell them to reject House bill 5560.

This is the opinion of the editorial board of MLive Media Group, the parent company of MLive.com. The board is made up of the company's executive leadership, content directors and editors who oversee the 10 local markets that make up MLive Media Group. See the [full list of editorial board members](#).

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