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TEXAS LEGISLATURE

Lawmakers hope to cease public notices in print

Newspapers have been the traditional site

By Nicole Cobler, Austin Bureau | January 25, 2015 | Updated: January 26, 2015 4:59pm



AUSTIN — Lawmakers have proposed legislation that would allow governmental bodies to use the Internet to post required notices, a step away from the age-old practice of placing them in newspapers.

A bill filed by Rep. Lyle Larson, R-San Antonio, would allow governmental bodies to post notices of meetings. The

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legislation, House Bill 814, is similar to House Bill 139, filed by Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, which would require the comptroller to maintain a web page to post the notices.

Bennett Sandlin, executive director for Texas Municipal League, said the organization supports both bills because they would save money for taxpayers. He said the group has been supporting bills similar to these for about 10 years.

“Moving some notices to the Internet we think is a reasonable idea,” Sandlin said. “The newspaper is expensive, and the Internet can be inexpensive or free in some cases.”

Donnis Baggett, executive vice president of the Texas Press Association, said removing public notices from newspapers would make the government less transparent. The Texas Press Association is opposing both bills this session.

“The main thing we want to do is protect the public’s right to know what its government is doing,” Baggett said. “You want more transparency, not less.”

Baggett said his other concern is that the public wouldn’t know to go onto a governmental agencies website to view public notices.

“A person would have to intuitively know to look on the website to know that governmental entity is having a meeting or not,” Baggett said.



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Larson said he met with five mayors from his district, and they all agreed that they wanted the legislation filed.

“They said: ‘Can we get some relief, because technology is changing and people are seeking other forms of communication for when the meetings are,’” Larson said.

Larson said his bill is a simpler approach to Stickland’s bill because it would allow municipalities to post the notices on their own individual websites. He said he has not had any groups directly oppose the bill.

Mayor David Marne of Shavano Park said he thinks the public would find these notices easier on government websites than in newspapers.

“The only person who would say that’s not a good idea is the guy that sells ink, the guy that sells paper or the guy who runs the paper,” Marne said.

In an era of diminishing ad revenue, Baggett said, losing revenue was not the Texas Press Association’s biggest concern.

“Nobody wants to lose revenue, but public notice is a relatively small proportion of overall newspaper revenue,” he said.

Marne said he did not feel as comfortable with Stickland’s bill because it would require all public notices to go on the comptroller’s website, which could lead to a fee being required. In its current form, Larson’s bill does not specify what type of website the notices should go on.

Larson said putting notices on the comptroller’s website would create a centralized location for all public notices, and in the future he would like to create an email alert system so that people could get public notices based on their ZIP code.

“Having one location for the whole state does a better job than having thousands of websites,” Larson said.

Larson also agreed that requiring public notices to be printed in newspapers costs

taxpayers millions of dollars, when most Texans don't even understand what they are.

"I think we've reached the digital age where a majority of Texans don't pick up the paper like they used to," Larson said.

ncobler@express-news.net

@nicolecobler

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