

Committee recommends print notices stay

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AUGUSTA -- A legislative committee has rejected a proposal, tucked into the supplemental budget proposed by Gov. Paul LePage, that removes a requirement that the state government publish public notices in newspapers.

The supplemental budget seeks to have public notices posted on the Internet instead.

However, the Legislature's State and Local Government Committee voted unanimously Monday night "ought not to pass" on the part of the supplemental budget containing the public notice change.

Committee Chairman Sen. Doug Thomas, R-Ripley, said how the state keeps the public informed and the role newspaper public notices play is a question best decided in separate, stand-alone legislation, not as part of the supplemental budget debate.

"It's a tough question," Thomas said following lengthy testimony before the committee.

LePage's supplemental budget proposal, which lawmakers are currently debating, would put state public notices posting and other Internet procedures out to bid, creating an online public notice service. It would also give the governor the authority to direct state agencies to use that proposed new online public notices service, with the online public notice taking the place of requirements that such notices be posted in newspapers.

Testimony before the committee estimated that not publishing state public notices in newspapers could save the state about \$900,000 in the general fund over the next two years, but some suggested that figure could be larger because some public notice advertising costs are also included within state agency budgets.

Thomas said the state government, and newspapers, need to do a better job of informing the public. He said the state probably has more people with Internet connections than people with newspaper subscriptions.

"I personally believe we have a responsibility to inform the public," he said. "We can save a little money, but it could come at the expense of informing the public. Newspapers need to be put on notice: There are those of us on the committee who think we need to do a better job of informing the public."

Mike Dowd, president of the Maine Press Association and editor in chief of the Bangor Daily News, said newspaper readership is much higher than newspaper circulation because subscribers tend to share their newspapers. Also, he said, newspapers generally post the public notices from their print editions online, where readership is growing significantly.

"We all have websites and our website traffic is growing by leaps and bounds," Dowd said.

"Many more people are seeing the BDN than ever have in history, print and web. In terms of eyeballs on (public) notices, that has never been greater" through newspapers.

Michael Cianchette, LePage's deputy counsel, argued that the Internet is a better way to keep the public informed. And it's cheaper.

"We agree we don't want to disenfranchise people and we want these notices to be out there," he said. "But it's a cost-benefit analysis. Just because we've always done something, doesn't mean we should continue doing it."

Rep. Anne Graham, D-North Yarmouth, said many Mainers don't have Internet connections, and some in rural areas don't even have Internet access. She said public notice laws are meant to inform the public, and that intent would not be fulfilled by instantly moving all state public notifications to the Internet only.

"You cannot say the Internet is adequate public notice," Graham said.

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