

Post-Intelligencer, It is the public's right to know (1.27.12)

A few of this state's misguided local governments are attempting again to reduce the public's right to know.

The legislature soundly defeated similar proposals in the previous session. The ideal was to no longer require governments to run public notice advertising in newspapers of record. Generally, the proposers of such legislation want the government to pay for the creation and maintenance of their own websites to publish notices.

Those proposing such legislation close their proposals by saying that this would be a way of saving taxpayers money. The argument goes that the web is free. It is true the government may see some savings, but websites do cost money to operate and maintain. Still, it is clear that the cost to the taxpayers will be more than mere dollars.

The cost of limiting or curtailing, in any fashion, the citizens' right to know about their government is too high and too costly. After all, our governments are representative bodies of "We, the People."

A study of history shows us that governments are virtually incapable of being their own watchdog. There are so many examples of corruption, malfeasance and general incompetence whenever a major institution — government or the private sector — is charged with policing itself, we couldn't list them all if we tried. Only a few short years ago, the news was full of many improprieties in the legislature itself. It stands to reason that the more outside eyeballs we have keeping track of "our" business, the better off we are.

A study of technology tells us that even a government-run website is susceptible to crashes, web-base attacks, hacking and could provide many opportunities to hide or bury an unpopular public notice within the nebulous world of the Internet. The Internet is wonderful for many things, including hiding things in plain site.

Tennessee's demographics tell us that far too few people will have access to the actions of their government if we rely solely on the Internet. The savings for a state such as Tennessee is not worth the price of our people not having as much access to their government as possible.

Every county in Tennessee is served by a paper of record. Most of the newspapers provide copies to the local schools and libraries. These pages provide tangible, hard proof of notice that can never be replicated on the Internet. Many papers keep bound copies of each edition and most papers provide state archives and local library with a microfilm copy of each edition. This is a concrete record of exactly how the notice was phrased. We cannot trust a website to be a reliable record 10 years or 20 years from now. Neither can we trust some possibly well-meaning "Fat Cat" to quietly pay a computer expert to have the online "official" record changed or even expunged.

The Internet certainly has its place and it is an important place. But it is also a place that newspapers have already carried their responsibilities. Most newspapers make their classified sections, which contain the public notices, available free on the web. In addition, the state's newspapers together have created and maintain a statewide database for public notices that already exists and is available to the public for free.

The key is that this website is in addition to the notice running in a newspaper of record, instead of replacing it.

We have always supported fiscal responsibility in government and acknowledge that newspapers have a financial stake in this debate, but we are firmly committed to the proposition that government works best when it is by the people and for the people. Our system of public notice is good, effective and economical. Don't fall prey to another case of politicians "fixing" something that wasn't broken in an effort to justify their own political existence.

We urge you to contact officials in government and encourage them to keep public notice public.

Guest editorial from the Citizen Tribune, Morristown.