

Keep newspaper public notices intact

Citizens should be aware of – and opposed to – House Bill 2801 and the provisions that would allow local governments to cease publishing public notices in their local newspapers.

The presumed cost savings to local government is in fact false economy – there is a hidden and very dangerous cost. In trying to save money, local governments would curtail access to the legislative process, and ensure that fewer – rather than more – citizens know what their representatives are up to.

The publishing of public notices in newspapers of record dates to 1789, when the first Congress required publication of its bills, orders, resolutions and votes in at least three generally available newspapers. The founders recognized that government should not be the gatekeepers of its own information. So their purpose was to require government to report its actions to citizens in a medium independent of government influence or control: the newspaper.

It was good policy then, and it remains good policy today.

Publishing legal notices in a newspaper of record ensures that decisions related to public debt, ordinances and laws, zoning, taxation and quality of life –all matters of compelling and perpetual public interest –are made with transparency. Legal notices empower the public to get involved in the process. And they contribute to a reservoir of archived material in a form that cannot be altered, changed, hacked, hidden or manipulated after the fact. This would simply not be true of notices published exclusively online.

In publishing public notices in newspapers of record, local government acknowledges that government itself carries the burden of keeping citizens informed, and that it will not shift that burden to the citizens themselves to go hunting for information.

To that end, the local, general-interest newspaper remains the vehicle with the widest reach to the widest cross-section of the community. And we can prove it.

Sound Publishing, the owner of this newspaper, alone reaches 700,000 Washington households through our print publications. Our colleagues from newspaper organizations around the state maintain commensurately broad distribution within their own communities. This is not “theoretical” reach, a “potential” audience that may or may not find its way to notices posted on a government website. This is actual reach, to readers who are active and interested and engaged in the community around them –and most certainly in local government affairs.

Not all citizens have computers, or smartphones, and not all have access to the web. Indeed, there are cost barriers to entry into, and participation in, today's world of digital communication.

But anyone – everyone – can at any time go down to the public library or the coffee shop, pick up the community newspaper and find out through the public notices what their government is up to. Affordable, egalitarian and very popular, general interest newspapers provide precisely what government needs most –a direct and demonstrable conduit to its citizens.

This issue really comes down to a philosophical question: Should government take its information to the people, or should government make the people come looking for that information, through a maze of agency and departmental websites?

We believe – and we are confident Washington citizens agree – that government at ALL levels has an affirmative obligation to take its information to the people – to make that extra effort, to ensure that public notices are not just “available,” but also widely seen and widely read.

House Bill 2801 flouts that obligation, and it should be rejected. The Legislature had the wisdom to dismiss similar legislation last session, and should demonstrate that same wisdom today.