

Lawmakers to vote on bill to end legal notice requirement

TRENTON — A bill to eliminate legal advertising requirements for governments was suddenly revived Friday, nearly a year after it underwent extensive criticism from good-government advocates and newspaper executives.

Both houses of the Legislature will be voting Monday on allowing governments the option to skip buying legal ads as long as they self-publish budgets, bids for services and other public records on the Internet.

Heather Taylor of The Citizens Campaign, a Metuchen-based good government advocacy group, testified against the bill when it was originally vetted during an Assembly committee meeting last February. The proposal never went to a full floor vote then.

“I thought that would be the last of it. I’m really surprised that it’s back,” Taylor said Friday. “It’s poor public policy, because it essentially allows the fox to mind the hen house. Governments would be putting themselves in charge of making sure they meet proper notification standards, and there would be little assurance that the best prices for bids and services would be obtained. Citizens need more safeguards, not less. Plus it’s being rushed through at the 11th hour.”

Monday’s votes will take place on the final day of the current legislative session. The bills were added to the agenda late Friday afternoon.

Assemblyman Jon M. Bramnick, R-Union, who is a bill sponsor, said he “didn’t receive a heads-up” from leadership in the lower house that the legislation would be moved. Assembly Speaker Sheila Y. Oliver, D-Essex, didn’t elaborate on the unusual maneuver in a statement released through her office.

Oliver called the measure “good public policy. Nothing in this bill alters a government entity’s ability to meet publication requirements through newspapers. It just provides a common sense option to save money, and it’s long past time we got this done.”

Bramnick said it’s too early to tell if the measure will pick up enough votes to go to Gov. Chris Christie’s desk but said he’s hopeful.

“I don’t think people rely on the small print in the back of a newspaper to determine if there’s a planning board meeting. That’s a very expensive way to make notification. We’ve evolved to the point where I don’t think it’s necessary to do things that way,” Bramnick said.

“My goal is not to put newspapers out of business. I recognize it’s a hit to them. A lot of businesses have evolved and maybe this is something newspapers can evolve with,” he added.

George White, executive director of the New Jersey Press Association, said the measure if enacted “would be devastating to government transparency, and it overlooks a sizable number of senior citizens and low-income citizens who lack access to the Internet.

“It seems like a simple proposition, putting the ads on town and government websites, but when you peel back the layers there’s more to it. Governments will have to hire additional personnel and upgrade their technology to take over this responsibility and in the final analysis it’s very reasonable to say that many towns will have higher costs,” he said.

Previous estimates from the NJPA put the cost of the ads statewide at \$20 million annually — \$12 million from individuals and \$8 million from the government.

White conceded that ending the legal notification requirement has the potential to “devastate the newspaper industry and lead to substantial job loss and the closing of newspapers. We do have vested interests, but we also need to highlight that it’s not just the money.”

“The state has told us directly that most municipalities lack websites that are robust enough to store and secure legally required public notifications. To think these notifications can be made the same way trash and leaf collections are posted is stretching things,” White said.

White said NJPA since 2003 has maintained a free aggregated searchable website where every legal ad is uploaded.