

Our View: Keep  
public notices in the  
public's hands

We treasure our state's natural environment  
in Wisconsin, and all you have to do is look  
out your window to see why.

Protecting that environment is pretty  
important to us for all sorts of reasons, and  
we've built a system that gives the  
Department of Natural Resources oversight  
of things like keeping our air and water  
clean. Reasonable people can debate  
about the efficacy of specific regulations,  
but no one doubts the importance of the  
framework itself.

A new provision in one of the bills being  
considered in Madison's special legislative  
session would remove a key part of this  
framework: independent oversight of DNR  
regulations.

Instead of publishing DNR public notices in newspapers, this bill would allow the government to post them to the government's own website.

The principle here is pretty simple. In a democracy, the government cannot be in charge of disseminating information about itself without meaningful third-party oversight. We don't have a system where citizens are just supposed to trust the government.

Posting public notices online sounds reasonable, but stop and think for a moment about some potential complications:

» An online notice cannot be reliably archived. And it's subject to tampering. If an unscrupulous politician or bureaucrat wanted to change the time, date or content of any given notice, it could be accomplished with a few keystrokes. That's

not true of notices published in newspapers.

» It's still the case that not everyone has access to the Internet.

» The new law would, for the first time, make it the responsibility of Wisconsin residents to proactively seek out information about the activities of their own government. This would be a huge shift from the current system, which puts the onus on the government.

Advocates of the change claim that it would save the department \$100,000. That Advertisement might be a lot of money in absolute terms, but it's not a tiny sliver of the department's \$583.4 million budget. There are better ways to save without limiting government transparency.

There also happens to be a very practical reason to oppose the change. Anyone who

has known the frustration of navigating a government website knows that they are rarely optimized for the user experience. And let's be honest: In an era of budget-cutting, few government agencies are likely to be building capacity for slick, user-friendly, easy-to-navigate websites.

It's not good enough for a public notice to be posted online if no one knows how to find it. The change to DNR public notices should not become law.