

Public a Key Adjective in Public Notice

For citizens to be truly in control of their government, it's imperative they know what their government is up to.

Sadly, there are a lot of politicians and government officials who'd like to keep the very public at whose pleasure they serve in the dark.

Last year, Gov. Bob McDonnell named his Commission on Government Reform and Restructuring to examine ways to cut the costs of and increase the efficiency of local and state government.

While many of the panel's recommendations have merit, an earlier one submitted to McDonnell's from a government worker in Southwest Virginia was particularly insidious in nature: to give government the option not to print public notices in newspapers of record.

McDonnell fell in love with the idea, seeing it solely as a way to save money. Governments could post the notices on their websites, on a public access channel or in the local library or "broadcast" them via automated voice or text alert systems.

Two bills emerged in the General Assembly this year as a result.

Del. Steve Landes, R-Augusta County, introduced House Bill 773 that would have made newspaper publication of public notices optional. Covered notices would include meeting notices of public bodies, the annual proposed local budget, proposed new rules and regulations ... the meat and potatoes of everyday government operations. Del. Ron Villanueva, R-Virginia Beach, introduced House Bill 1193 which covered local government procurement notices.

McDonnell and the two major local government associations in Virginia — the Virginia Municipal League and the Virginia Association of Counties — pushed hard on the bills, trying to convince legislators that it's just about saving the taxpayers some money and that it's just about "keeping up with the times," in Landes' words.

Last Thursday, however, a House of Delegates subcommittee killed Landes' bill, but after arm-twisting by the governor, revived Villanueva's procurement notices bill, which will come before the full House this week.

These bills are bad legislation, and the "logic" behind them is fatally flawed, for as they purport to advance the cause of open government the result, in fact, would be government being able to operate more in the dark, away from the eyes of its citizens.

Cynics would say newspapers have led the opposition to these bills because they don't want to lose the ad revenue. That is as wrong as it is pathetic in its reasoning.

Newspapers have always been champions of open government, working tirelessly to keep citizens apprised of their government's activities. Only Virginia's newspapers, with readership and circulation in the millions, reach a majority of the commonwealth's residents. Not public access channels — not everyone has cable. Not a locality's website — you'd be surprised how many people still have dialup Internet access. Not a locality's text alert or automated voice system.

We trust our legislators will vote to keep Virginia's government open for all.