

The notion of printed notices

How simple should it be for you to find out information about your local government?

Very simple. Very easy.

That principle has been under pressure this year. Efforts have been afoot to make it easier for governments to publish information — but in a way that makes it less easy for citizens to access it.

Bills in the General Assembly would allow localities to meet public notice requirements through websites, radio or television. Governments are required by law to publish meeting notices, bid advertisements for construction projects, court-ordered trustee sales and a variety of other forms of information so that the public can remain informed. Current law requires publication in a newspaper of general circulation.

Publishing these notices instead on a website would be easier for government, and would save some tax money. But the cost in public information and involvement would not be worth it.

Here, a disclaimer: Newspapers earn money by printing the required notices in their classified advertisements sections.

But newspapers are in the business of promoting a principle: that open information is good for democracy, good for education, good for society. Newspapers are in the business of implementing that principle. In this debate, we are in the business of defending that principle.

Publishing public notices on government websites or other electronic media would be an excellent way to disseminate information — if it were in addition to printed notices.

Here's why printed notices are still necessary, even in this modern day and age:

» Not all homes have access to computers; in fact, in many communities, a majority of residents lack easy computer access. Publishing notices solely on government websites would deprive these citizens of public information. Yes, residents might be able to go to their local library to use a computer — which could necessitate a long wait for a turn at the terminal — but it is far easier to pick up a local newspaper at any of a number of locations (including the library).

» Even with computer access, citizens could find the notices hard to locate. Finding public announcements could entail separate searches of websites for: city councils, boards of supervisors, school boards, individual courts, water authorities, sewer authorities, transportation authorities, economic development authorities, planning commissions — and the list goes on. Newspaper versions of public notices are aggregated in one location for easy access.

» Printed notices provide a permanent record. Websites change, information expires. Even when electronic information is archived, it can be difficult to find without just the right search word.

What's more (and this is not mere paranoia), websites can be tampered with. Hackers can crash sites or scramble information. Worse (and hopefully this is mere paranoia), government functionaries could alter electronic material after the fact, to cover misdeeds or mistakes. But when public information is printed, it is printed in multiple copies. Physical copies can be archived and protected in numerous places. And if ever there were a question about what a notice did in fact say, a hard copy could be pulled as evidence.

Publishing public notices online, or on radio or television, would be an excellent addition to current policy, disseminating information in even broader formats. That would be good for democracy, education, society. But notices should not be published electronically exclusively.

One of the General Assembly bills calling for electronic publication has been recommended to be tabled. The same should be done to a second bill.