

Virginia lawmakers could remove public notices from newspapers

By JONATHAN PARKER

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An effort to remove government public notices from Virginia newspapers is gaining steam in the General Assembly.

Over the years, public notices have come under attack through bills aimed at pulling notices from newspapers and allowing governments to post them on websites.

Recently, Gov. Bob McDonnell's task force on state mandates recommended ending the requirement to place local government public notices in newspapers of record.

Removing public notices from newspapers would force citizens to hunt for proposed government action on often difficult-to-navigate government websites, according to Virginia Press Association president Ginger Stanley.

"The danger rests in the citizens of Virginia not knowing what government actions are being proposed," Stanley said.

The press association is spearheading an awareness campaign - "Keep the Light on Public Notices" - to educate citizens on the importance of keeping government notices in local newspapers.

County, city, and town governments are required to place public notices, which include zoning, public hearings, business and licensing matters, elections, and requests for proposals, in newspapers with a general circulation covering the community.

Pittsylvania County and the towns of Gretna, Hurt, and Chatham are required to place public notices in the Star-Tribune or Danville Register & Bee to keep citizens informed of upcoming issues and pending decisions.

According to a recent survey, 94 percent of surveyed citizens believe keeping people informed through public notices in newspapers is an important government function.

The survey, commissioned by the Virginia Press Association, concluded that 97 percent believe the public's right to know what government is doing or planning is very important.

"When government is trying to find trust and transparency, this is not the time to start having secret initiatives because the public will not know where to find them (public notices) if they are not in their local newspaper," Stanley said.

Over the last few years, legislators narrowly killed bills in committee to allow public notices on government websites instead of paying to place notices in the newspaper, which reaches a far wider audience, Stanley said.

According to the Virginia Press Association survey, 63 percent would read public notices either much less often - 36 percent - or less often - 27 percent - if placed only on government websites.

"The survey results strongly confirm my experience that Virginians expect the government to be conducted openly, fairly, and transparently," said Del. Riley E. Ingram, who chairs the House Committee on Counties, Cities, and Towns.

"Virginians clearly have a deep commitment to the fundamental principles of democratic governance. Newspapers, both daily and weekly, continue to have a prominent role in the maintenance of these principles through Virginia's communities."

Del. Don Merricks, who represents Pittsylvania County in the 16th District, has voted against bills to remove public notices from newspapers.

"I've been voting against it mainly because the place I represent is mostly rural," Merricks said.

Merricks said newspapers are the best instruments to relay information in many communities.

"I still think in our area the newspaper is the generally accepted means of information," Merricks said.

Rural residents struggle with poor Internet service and many elderly citizens do not use computers, Merricks said.

"I'm not in favor of it and I argue against it," Merricks said.

Legislators representing urban communities, however, are pushing the measure, which Merricks believes will pass in the next three to four years.

"I can just tell you the handwriting on the wall is there," Merricks said. "I can just feel it coming."

Del. Danny Marshall of Danville, who represents the 14th District, said legislators have debated similar bills for 12 years.

"I'm a limited government person," said Marshall, who chairs the subcommittee that debated recent bills. "I don't like for government to tell me I have to do anything."

Marshall said local governments should be able to post notices online to save money.

"I think if a government wants the option of putting them on a website, they should be able to," Marshall said. "The intent of the law is it's a public notice."

Marshall described the public notices debate as "a non-issue."

"This is not one of the things that rocks the commonwealth either way," he said.

Virginia citizens disagree, Stanley said, adding the press association hears from residents across the state concerned about public notices only being posted online.

"Even though they are able to get to the Internet, they are not going to government websites for information," Stanley said.

Newspapers provide a necessary measure of checks and balances by ensuring governments adequately inform citizens.

"Government should not be allowed to notice itself," Stanley said. "That is not transparency. A third-party entity is necessary for checks and balances."

Stanley encouraged citizens to call or email local legislators.

"Let them know that it's important to them that public notices remain in the newspaper," she said.

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For more information on the Virginia Press Association's "Keep the Light on Public Notices" campaign, visit the association's website, [www.vpa.net](http://www.vpa.net).