

Mark Engebretson: Newspapers help ensure access to public notices

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With the Texas Legislature in session, there are already hundreds of bills filed for consideration.

Among them are criminal sanctions for texting while driving, a proposal to make "sexting" a misdemeanor and so many others it's hard to wrap one's mind around all the ways legislators can come up with something so they can tell constituents, "See what I did?"

Of course, some will be consolidated and others will likely never see the light of day. Not all proposed laws are bad, but some have been filed with little consideration of "unintended consequences." One that crops up almost every legislative session is a bill that would allow governmental entities to post public notices on their websites.

If this somehow passes muster and becomes law, folks will have to look at each and every state government website to find out if there is anything that affects us.

Freshman Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Hurst, filed that bill that would give governmental bodies the option of posting their public notices on their own government-controlled websites instead of printing them in newspapers.

Anyone who has visited Texas government websites — Texas Commission on Environmental Quality or the Texas Railroad Commission to name two — understands how difficult it is to navigate these sites.

Links are often buried among dozens of such, many with titles unrelated to anything for which a person might seek. On the other hand, links that could have the information in fact do not.

Search engines are nearly impossible to use because every time a particular searched word is found, it pops up in the results. Sometimes there are pages and pages and pages of results.

The bottom line is, there is no standardized website design. Each entity has been allowed to design its own to address whatever that body does with no thought to standardization. Most folks don't have the time or patience to sort through these websites looking for information.

Governmental bodies claim it will save money, but a Texas Press Association-led survey found that the average cost to governmental entities was less than 1 percent of budgets.

People who use computers forget there are literally thousands of folks who don't. For whatever reason — lack of skills, lack of service, lack of money to purchase a computer or too little disposable income to pay for Internet service — a lot of people don't have Internet access.

It's a bad idea and TPA continues to fight for the right of the public to know what these agencies are doing that will affect our daily lives, property, children and tax dollars.

Call legislators, let them know — it's a bad idea, forget it. Don't know who the legislators are? They're listed on the Internet.

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