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Keeping people aware of what's going on

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Democracy is not for everybody. We've learned that in the Middle East, where societies with ancient tribal roots are shown to be unprepared for a government system in which the majority rules by public vote.

Government of the people, by the people and for the people can work only if the people are informed. An electorate that does not know or understand what government is all about is an invitation to despotism.

A small but important part of the American system is the public notice: Announcements required by law to be published for all to see about the nitty-gritty of governing — meetings of government bodies, bid openings, court proceedings, budget making and such.

That's job of public notices

They're usually dry, full of technical details and printed in small type, not often the kind of thing that gets people excited. Unless ...

Unless the subject is your street, your business, your tax dollars. In that case, those dry "legals" can become intensely interesting.

Public notices are a protection for an informed electorate, a safeguard against government bodies taking significant action without people knowing what's going on. They're there for all to see, and an informed and interested electorate will pay attention.

Law details instances in which public notices are required and describes what type of notice will suffice. Tennessee law basically requires publication in "a newspaper of general circulation." Some people want to change that, saying that government could save money if other means of distribution are used. The most frequently mentioned alternative is online distribution, usually by the web site of the government entity.

That suggestion is flawed in several ways.

For one thing, there are far more people in Tennessee who read newspapers than who use computers. Displaying notices only online would shut out a significant segment of the public.

Also, notices online require the computer user to initiate the action to seek out the notice online. Newspapers may be bought for the comics or a crossword puzzle, but there sits the public notice section, right at hand. Casual contact is much more likely in print than online.

Tennessee's newspapers have banded together to distribute their printed public notices through a common web site, www.publicnoticeads.com, at no additional charge.

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The aim is the broadest possible distribution, seeking to keep the people in the know. And the adage is true: Knowledge is power.

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