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Keeping notices in newspapers about transparency

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It's impossible for the Arizona Daily Sun to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest when commenting on the proposed switch of legal notices from newspapers to government websites.

So we will acknowledge that conflict up front -- yes, the Daily Sun is paid to publish legal notices. The revenue is not inconsequential, but it means a lot more to small weeklies, which have much less diversified advertising bases but have become essential parts of their communities.

But we feel the issue is about a lot more than money, and being in the First Amendment business, we hope readers will give our reasons due consideration.

The first is accessibility. You can't have a democracy without easy access to information about your government, and the press traditionally has made that one of its key functions. A printed legal notice, whether it's about a council meeting or a contract award, is a highly visible and easy digestible way to help citizens learn what their government is up to. Yes, the print is sometimes almost too small to read, but that is a boon to taxpayers, who ultimately are paying by the column-inch.

A second reason is transparency. Government officials, being human, don't go out of their way to announce things like tax increases that they know will get citizens upset. The worldwide web, with its limitless capacity, can be an easy place to hide such information -- or at least make it harder to find. A printed notice at budget time or tax time, on the other hand, doesn't require any fancy Internet search skills and it's a useful tool to help citizens stay engaged with their government.

Finally, it's about equity -- treating all citizens as equally as possible. At this point, Internet access is not universal, but postal service is. A copy of a newspaper, if it isn't delivered or purchased at a store, can still be mailed most anywhere for the cost of second-class postage. It's also a permanent record that can't be altered or deleted online.

Wouldn't allowing government agencies to post public notices on their websites be cheaper? Perhaps, but there are certain costs that a self-governing society decides to accrue in the interest of access, transparency and equity. Keeping legal notices available in print may seem like small potatoes when the headlines are about secret drone strikes and backroom deals in Congress. But if all politics ultimately is local, then so, too, is the way that citizens in a community hold their



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elected officials accountable to the basic flow of public information.

Published legal notices are part of that process, and we think it's important enough not to change it, no matter how much more cheaply those officials say they can do it themselves.

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