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Last of 6 Public Notice bills fails in Senate

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Posted: Friday, February 22, 2013 9:22 am

By Michael Schuster Capital News Service

RICHMOND - A Senate committee voted 10-3 to kill the last bill this legislative session to let public bodies post their official notices on a government website instead of publishing them in a local newspaper.

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House Bill 1823, introduced by Delegate Ronald Villanueva, R-Virginia Beach, sought to require public bodies to post procurement notices and bids on the electronic website of the Virginia Department of General Services. Publishing such notices in a newspaper would have been optional.

The legislation passed the House on a 73-25 vote on Feb. 1. The bill then was referred to the Senate Committee on General Laws and Technology. On Monday, the committee recommended that the measure be "passed by indefinitely," meaning it is dead for this session.

Representatives of the Virginia Press Association and Virginia Coalition for Open

Government were some of the strongest opponents of such bills.

VPA officials said they were mostly concerned with keeping citizens informed about government actions. Not every citizen has Internet access, especially in rural areas of Virginia. The VPA's main goal was to keep public notices in print-based newspapers in order to keep the issues in the public eye.

Public notices include announcements about government budgets, public hearings and alcohol beverage licenses. Six public notice bills were heard in the 2013 session and every one of them failed.

Megan Rhyne, executive director of VCOG, was satisfied with the defeat of the public notice bills.

"I'm pleased that most of the General Assembly members who heard these bills agreed that the public would be better served with public notices remaining in newspapers," Rhyne said.

She predicted that some lawmakers will continue to push to move these public announcements to the Internet.

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"There will likely be more attempts because hard-pressed localities are looking for ways to minimize costs," Rhyne said. "But at the same time, we know that a cost is not worth cutting if it means we are informing fewer taxpayers about how their tax dollars are going to be spent."

###

Public Notices Bills and their Fate

The General Assembly considered six bills to ease or remove the requirement that public notices be published in newspapers. Here are the proposals and what happened to them:

HB 1378, to allow localities with at least 50,000 residents to advertise public notices on their websites or broadcast outlets instead of in local newspapers. This bill was folded into a similar measure, HB 1373. HB 1373 then was defeated 1-10 by a subcommittee of the House Committee on Counties, Cities, and Towns.

HB 1426, to allow the towns of Damascus and Glade Spring in southwest Virginia to publish legal notices on their websites instead of in the local newspapers. It was defeated 4-7 by the same subcommittee.

SB 765, an identical proposal regarding Damascus and Glade Spring. It was defeated 3-11 by the Senate Committee on General Laws and Technology.

HB 2170, requiring local governments to publish procurement notices on the state's central electronic procurement website and making newspaper publication option. This bill was folded into HB 1823, which was then killed by the Senate Committee on General Laws and Technology.

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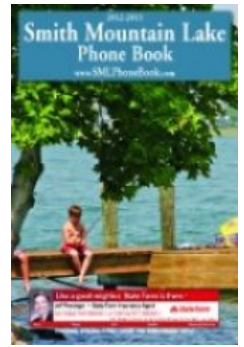
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