

Legal notices get public airing through paper

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As you're reading The Pantagraph's classified ads for garage sales, lost pets, used cars and other useful stuff, check out one of more interesting parts of the section.

Within those columns are the keys to the workings of government, civil law, business and nonprofit groups, all contained within the broad scope of "legal notices."

The notices, required by state law to be published in a newspaper of general circulation, now are available at PublicNoticeIllinois.com, a free service of the Illinois Press Association. IPA-member newspapers like The Pantagraph are legally required to send all published notices to the website, where they can be viewed for free.

That means legal notices published in Decatur, Springfield, Chicago or Rockford are just as easy to find as those published in The Pantagraph. The idea is so popular, in fact, the Illinois website is being used as a model in Ohio and California.

But why should you care what's printed as a legal notice?

Well, you can see when a school district publishes a request for bids for a new roof, when a village publishes its intent to issue bonds or when a bank forecloses on a house in your neighborhood.

Legal notices (also called public notices) include filings of bankruptcy, "assumed names" of new businesses, personal name changes, utility rate plans, zoning requests, estate claims, foreclosures, liens and income guidelines for school lunches, among many others.

Some government folks and others would like to make those notices more difficult to obtain. During every legislative session in Springfield, bills are introduced to limit access to these important notices.

"Public notices are vital to open government," said Dennis DeRossett, executive director of the IPA and former publisher of the Southern Illinoisan in Carbondale. "Just as important is the independent, third-party verification of notices that newspapers provide in the public notice process. This website is an extension of services already provided by newspapers, and we've been able to do this for the public at no cost to taxpayers."

A good way to keep up on the affairs of local government is to read The Pantagraph daily, and regularly check out www.publicnoticeillinois.com.