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Public notice bill fails in Senate

Published 11:12am Saturday, February 23, 2013

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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.

Introduced by Del. Ronald Villanueva, R-Virginia Beach, the bill 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.

“This is a victory for the citizens of Virginia,” said Tony Clark, associate publisher for The Tidewater News. The longstanding requirement that legal notices be published in a community’s newspaper of record has stood the test of time because newspapers are still how a majority of Virginians inform themselves. A citizen’s right to know, even if some politicians feel differently, should be protected at all costs.”

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 spring 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.

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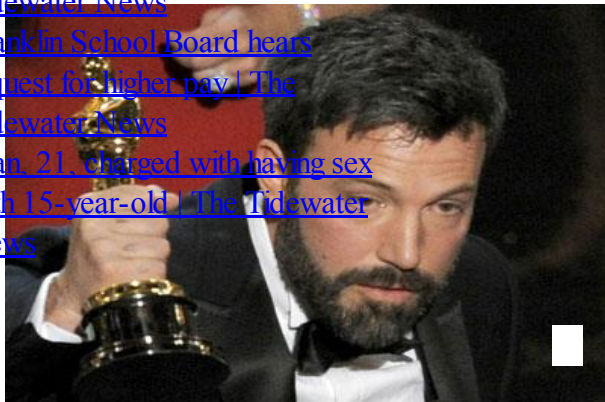
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