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**Subscription Forms****City board delays action on public-notice issue**

by Tom Joyce

Staff Reporter

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Tom Joyce | The News

Mount Airy Commissioner Shirley Brinkley listens to comments Thursday afternoon from fellow board members regarding a city



localities to advertise legal notices online rather than in newspapers.

The Internet has become an important communication tool — but the local newspaper is still a major resource for keeping citizens informed, Mount Airy officials said Thursday afternoon when action on a related issue was postponed.

That matter involves a bill now under consideration in the N.C. General Assembly which would allow local governments to advertise public notices online rather than in newspapers.

Shirley Brinkley, a member of the city board of commissioners, had asked that it consider endorsing Senate Bill 186 as a cost-cutting measure. That resulted in a proposed resolution appearing on the agenda for the board's meeting Thursday, containing wording that Mount Airy officials support the resolution "to the appropriate delegates."

But that didn't happen — with the only vote occurring being one to delay any action on an endorsement, and discussion among board members indicating that local support for the state bill might not occur at all.

"I have been asked to postpone this," Brinkley explained at the start of the discussion. "I would like us to have more research on it."

This opened the door for other board members to express support for the present situation that requires announcements of public hearings and other legal notices to appear in newspapers — The Mount Airy News in this city's case.

Commissioners Dean Brown and Jon Cawley were especially vocal in that regard, citing the necessity of making sure citizens are properly informed about hearings and other matters while also supporting a local business.

Although Brinkley sought to delay a vote regarding the state bill, Brown said, "at this time I am against this thing at all."

He presented bound copies of extensive research he has done recently, reflecting various studies showing that newspapers remain a viable instrument nationally. Among them is one showing that 83 percent of people in all age groups rely on their local papers for news and other information. Persons 30 years old to 65-plus regularly read newspapers, Brown said.

This is probably even more the case in Mount Airy where a sizable segment of the community might not even own computers, although Brown stopped short of referring to it as the senior citizen population.

Yet one survey cited by Brown, from Pew Research Center, downplays any age barrier in showing that four of every 10 young people read daily news or newspapers. Brown also believes younger folks who totally rely on computerized technology might do so mainly to access social media sites such as Facebook, and not to access public notices.

Commissioner Cawley said he believes The Mount Airy News, in particular, does "yeoman's work" in keeping citizens informed about their local government, while acknowledging that people do rely on modern devices such as iPads and cell phones.

"But even on my iPad or on my phone, I get The Mount Airy News," Cawley added.

Along with the consideration of informing the community about city government legal notices and other matters, commissioners Cawley, Brown and Steve Yokeley said the situation involves supporting local businesses.

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"We encourage people to use local businesses, so why would we take away from it?" Brown said.

He added in prepared remarks, "Why would we cut a service we have had for over 125 years?" referring to the fact The Mount Airy News dates to 1880, "a service that is used by our citizens on a daily basis."

Cawley indicated that if an entity, including a newspaper, is not needed, then it will die off on its own without someone trying to hasten its demise through legislative channels. Cawley said that whether the board voted Thursday or not, he wouldn't support the resolution endorsing the state bill.

"I understand that somebody in Raleigh thought it would be a good idea to save money."

The annual statewide cost of requiring legal notices to be published in newspapers is said to be upward of \$4 million, which would be a financial hit to newspapers if taken away. Mount Airy averages spending about \$300 per public notice advertised, although a complete annual figure was not available.

"I don't want to do away with a longtime business, but we have to look at the future," Brinkley said in response to the comments by fellow board members.

Senate Bill 186 would allow public notices to be posted online, such as on local government websites.

An official of the North Carolina Press Association has said that any cost savings from the bill would be lost when localities spend money to upgrade websites and manage their own notifications.

That seemed to be one reason why Brinkley sought a delay in Thursday's vote. "A lot needs to be checked on this," she said of such factors as how much online postings might cost the municipality. "I believe we need a little more information."

The decision to delay the action was 3-2, with Brown and Cawley opposed, apparently reflecting their belief that the resolution supporting the state bill should not be considered at all.

Brinkley conceded that by the time the local resolution is considered, the fate of the bill in Raleigh might already have been decided.

### Half-Million In Savings

In other business Thursday afternoon, the commissioners gave unanimous approval to plans that will save more than \$500,000 in financing costs for two loans now being paid off by the city government.

This will result from modifications to existing installment purchase contracts with Bank of America and PNC Bank, recommended by city Finance Director John Overton.

These will allow the municipality to capitalize on lower interests costs available for money borrowed in order to finance water and sewer line extensions to annexed areas in recent years.

Although this required a budget amendment of \$255,477 Thursday afternoon to cover prepayment/modification and bank legal fees required for the refinancing, Overton said a net savings exceeding a half-million dollars will result over the life of the loans.

"The reduction of debt service will more than pay for that over a five-year period," the finance director told the board Thursday concerning the approved expenditure.

### Hearing For Apartments

Also Thursday, a public hearing was set on a rezoning request related to an apartment complex for senior citizens proposed for property on West Virginia Street.

A Greensboro firm has asked that the 5.4-acre site be rezoned from its present dual designations of R-20 (residential) and B-4 (Highway Business) to R-6 (General Residential), to allow a 56-unit apartment project.

The rezoning requires a public hearing, which the commissioners agreed to hold at their next meeting on April 18 at 7 p.m.

This will give citizens a chance to weigh in on the apartments targeted for 191 W. Virginia St., near the Beasley Street intersection just off West Pine Street (N.C. 89-West). Some citizens expressed concerns last month when the request came before the Mount Airy Planning Board, an advisory group to the commissioners which recommended the rezoning in a 5-0 decision.

The apartment complex, for residents 55 and older, would contain 29 one-bedroom and 27 two-bedroom units, with on-site amenities including a computer room, gazebo and picnic shelter with tables, based on previous reports.

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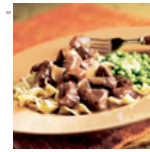
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