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Public notices in newspapers fill valuable role in community

March 17, 2013 5:38 PM

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With the debate about public notices going on across the state, it's important to understand why they are so important to readers.

Public notices provide readers with a glimpse into the actions of government agencies that otherwise would be difficult to find. Think for a moment about how many different municipalities exist in Yuma County – without a newspaper to aggregate those public notices, it would be a difficult task to check each different entity's website to find out what was going on. A newspaper's "public notices" truly reflects their intent: to inform the public when important actions are about to be taken. Those actions could be big or small, but in some way impact a reader's life.

The list of what could be included as a public notice is long and varied, but includes general public improvements, upcoming public hearings, budget information, tax information, requests for bids on government contracts, updates regarding foreclosed and abandoned property and more.

The public has a need to be informed about this sort of information, in a method that's easily available and affordable to them.

Newspaper publication provides both public access and historical preservation in a print format that can't be lost or altered. At the same time, newspapers provide a searchable archive of information in online databases that are specifically designed to be user-friendly.

But the role of public notices is greater than just information dissemination. Should an entity be able to only post those public notices on its website, where will the accountability come from? It needs to come from the outside – a watchdog role that newspapers consider fundamental. And, public notices provide a method of communication from the government to the public.

The Memphis, Tenn., Daily News points out, "Public notice creates an audit trail on the activities of government. Public notice is a tool for the people to call into question what a government or bank or neighboring landowner does ... in a medium that is independent and objective."

The Ohio Newspaper Association notes that it's the government's responsibility in a democracy to inform the public in places, such as print newspapers, where people will find them. The goal is to push the information out there – it's not reasonable to expect citizens to pull the information from government websites that they would rarely view.

And there are benefits to government entities putting public notices in newspapers. Delinquent tax notices in newspapers result in revenue coming back to the government that otherwise may not occur.

And, they provide an easy means of communicating with the public in a manner that leaves a printed, unchangeable, third-party record, while at the same time providing transparency and accountability to our government entities. Our current system is working.

It's essential that public notices remain in our newspapers.

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