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Senate Bill seeks to place public notices online

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Posted: Friday, March 15, 2013 3:00 am

By NICOLE CARTRETTE Staff Writer | 1 comment

The days of cities and counties being required to publish public notices in the newspaper may soon come to an end, if some lawmakers have their way.

Senate Bill 186 was filed last week, calling for electronic publication on a county or city website as an acceptable way of giving public notice.

Under the proposal, newspaper publication would be optional.

Links to the notice would be required on the main page index and maintained for at least one year on the site.

The N.C. Association of County Commissioners has long supported such a measure and it remains one of the organization's legislative goals.

"The legislation would allow a board of commissioners to adopt an ordinance to make this change," the NCACC legislative update reads.

"The county may choose to apply the ordinance to any board appointed by the county governing board, including the board of social services and board of health. The county board of elections may also choose to adopt an ordinance for the same

purpose."

According to a survey conducted by the NCACC in 2012, the legislation could save counties more than \$2 million per year.

In 2011, Columbus County advertising costs (including those not required by law) totaled about \$10,000.

It is a proposal that is typically introduced every year in the state legislature.

Newspapers and local governments are on opposite sides of the issue.

From public hearings on zoning issues to changes in local laws or ordinances, small and large newspapers across the state publish a number of legal notices for the public, as required by law.

Opponents of the bill argue that unless a person knows to look for a public notice on a website, it is unlikely it will come to their attention.

County Management Information Systems (MIS) officials shared visitor data from the county website.

According to Google Analytics from Feb. 10 to March 12, the county website had 6,679 visitors but just 3,652 unique visitors. The average visitor spent 2.5 minutes at the site.

County Commissioner Buddy Byrd was chairman in 2011. At the time he did not see the proposal as a good idea in counties like Columbus.

"I still feel like it should be run in the public newspapers," Byrd said. He pointed out that at Hallsboro and other parts of his district people "lined up" to get the newspaper.

"Everybody doesn't have access to a computer," Byrd said. "I would say being a rural county a lot of our people depend on that paper."

In 2011, Whiteville City Manager Larry Faison shared similar views. He said that while the concept is "interesting," he did not believe that electronic notices alone would reach all segments of the city's residents.

"In our area folks tend to rely on printed media rather than electronic media," Faison said. While the city has a website and has a Facebook page, Faison said he did not see it as the main source of information to the public.

Lake Waccamaw Town Manager Darren Currie said at the time that the majority of residents tended to rely on the newspaper for such information. He pointed out that many people (typically older generations) do not have Internet access and would not benefit from online publication only.

Sen. Trudy Wade, a former Guilford County Commissioner, and Sen. Andrew Brock of Davie County are the prime sponsors of the bill.

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A little research would show that lake waccamaw has had the privilege to put electronic notices online since 2003 here is a link to bill with Raleigh and lake waccamaw. <http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2003/Bills/Senate/PDF/S292v3.pdf>

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