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NEWS

[April 18, 2013]

EDITORIAL: Legislature must not scrap public notices

Apr 19, 2013 (Hickory Daily Record - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- Four pieces of legislation would hamper the public's right to know what local government is planning.

The bills would allow cities, counties and even one state agency to put public notices on their web sites and not publish notifications in newspapers. Currently, North Carolina law requires government notices such as announcing public hearings to be placed in newspapers. The publication must be done in a timely manner. The requirement is a critical element in protecting the right to know about actions that will directly affect the public.

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It's also a requirement that any entity that operates a public water and/or sewer system notify the news media if there is a problem such as a sewer line overflow.

Yes, newspapers do get revenue from these notices. But the Record, for example, doesn't charge government owners for these notices, but a similar notice placed by

doesn't charge government any more for these notices than a similar notice placed by a citizen.

Too many people do not regularly access government web sites. In fact, studies show that most people don't visit government web sites at all. If not for the required newspaper notices, most people would not be aware of pivotal actions, ordinances or laws that could materially affect their lives.

Some counties and municipalities have little information on their Internet sites and do not routinely post items of public interest such as agendas, meeting schedules, meeting minutes or legal notices.

What once were legislative bills affecting only a few specific governments is now a move to scrap all newspaper notifications for self-managed web-only information.

We oppose that shift. It compromises public access. Too much public information can be purposefully hidden if this legislation becomes law.

Here's a rundown from the North Carolina Press Association of the four legislative proposals: -- Senate Bill 287. This bill initially only applied to Guilford County and the cities of Greensboro and High Point along with the town of Morrisville. More communities were added for consideration. The bill was approved in committee and heads to the full Senate.

-- Senate Bill 186. This is a statewide bill. Under it every city and county in North

Carolina would be permitted to place public notices on their own websites in lieu of publication in local newspapers where the public will notice them.

-- House Bill 504. This bill currently affects nine counties: Buncombe, Guilford, Henderson, Mecklenburg, Mitchell, Perquimans, Stanly, Surry and Wake, and all of the municipalities within those counties. It allows the cities that do not have their own websites or ability to post public notices electronically to use their county-run website instead. Omitted from this bill is the requirement that copies of public notices be provided to each library in the community.

-- House Bill 755. This bill affects the entire state, allowing the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to give notice of hearings with only notices posted on its website and emails to those people who sign up in advance to receive them. Currently notices of such hearings dealing with issues of wells and discharge of waste to surface water must be published in newspapers. Under this bill only those regularly checking the state-operated website or those who had the foresight to sign up for email notification would be alerted.

The last bill is especially disturbing. Newspapers and public interest groups fought for years to remove the cloak of secrecy from state government. Now, some lawmakers want to restore the shroud. Mandating public notices where the people are more likely to look for them and see them is a defense against government in the shadows. We have a comprehensive Government in Sunshine code, and it must not be weakened.

We do not want any type of special treatment extended throughout state government.

The publication requirement has served the people well. It works. It should not be scrapped.

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