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Friday May 10, 2013

Proposed public notice bill threat to government transparency



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Posted: Thursday, April 25, 2013 10:51 pm | Updated: 7:32 am, Fri Apr 26, 2013.

A proposed bill in the Texas Legislature threatens to strike a blow to government transparency.

House Bill 335, sponsored by state Reps. Jonathan Strickland, R-Bedford, and Jason Villalba, R-Dallas, would allow governmental entities to publish public notices on their websites instead of in newspapers. At present, state law requires legal notices to be published in newspapers.

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The Courier publishes these notices from entities such as school districts, municipalities and the county that provide readers with important information regarding tax rates, annexation and zoning, among others.

While newspapers do receive revenue from these notices, it's based on the lowest rate for classified advertising available and only a small percentage of the industry's overall revenue. The notices provide an easily accessible avenue for the public to learn about government actions, serving both our readers and the governmental entities.

While the Texas Municipal League, among some others, believes posting on government websites would suffice, the truth is it would require the public to surf tens, if not hundreds of websites to find this

information, rather than one reliable source — the newspaper. Very few residents regularly visit government websites to search for posted legal notices, while newspaper readership among voters remains high.

In addition to publishing the notices in print, newspapers — at no extra charge — post them online, which draws millions of viewers statewide on the numerous daily newspaper websites.

In addition, the Texas Press Association provides a conglomerated site on its website for these notices.

These public notices in newspapers provide everyday watchdogs the opportunity to keep an eye on their government and tax dollars while raising awareness about government spending, tax rates and projects affecting traffic, public health, air and water quality.

Also, limiting these notices to government-run Internet sites would disenfranchise those who still don't have computer access, including many minorities, the elderly, disabled and those in rural communities who are less likely to have online capability.

These costs of printed notices are minimal compared with other government expenditures, and the positives outweigh the small percentage of government spending for these notices — around 0.005 percent of county budgets statewide, according to the Texas Press Association.

We urge our locally elected legislators not to support this bill and our government officials who have benefited

\$1.55



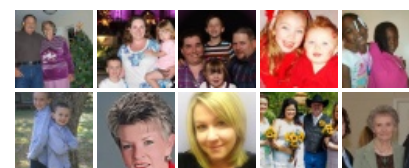
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through the years from their notices running in this newspaper to express their concerns to legislators regarding this proposed legislation.



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