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Public notice change gets OK from Senate

by Staff and wire report

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RALEIGH — More local governments would be allowed to post legal notices online rather than in newspapers to comply with North Carolina law in a bill narrowly given final approval Tuesday in the state Senate.

The Senate gave its final approval and voted 26-22 in favor of the legislation — SB 287 — that would give 10 counties and nearly all the municipalities within them the option to place notices for things like proposed zoning changes, public hearings and lists of delinquent taxpayers on government websites instead of in local newspapers. They also can use both communication methods.

The bill will now move on to the House.

The counties include Wake, Mecklenburg and Guilford and several in the mountains. Some municipalities already had the online option. Supporters call the change a money-saving measure for governments

seeking to avoid the high cost of newspaper advertising as more people have access to the Internet.

"It's about government efficiency and government choices," said first-term Sen. Tamara Barringer, R-Wake, one of the bill sponsors, adding that "this truly is a local bill that gives municipalities options."

The North Carolina Press Association opposes the measure because it says people wouldn't see the notices and rural newspapers would be hurt by a loss of steady revenue. Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, D-Orange, said she talked to operators of small papers in her district who told her they receive \$1,500 to \$3,000 a week on the legal advertising.

"The loss of revenue could put some of these small newspapers out of business," Kinnaird said, potentially cutting off a vital method for small communities to learn about their government and each other.

The bill would require that governments post in newspapers at least once a month for 12 years instructions on how people can access the legal notices online. The notices also must remain on the website for at least a year.

State Senator Gene McLaurin of Rockingham was one of the 22 senators who voted against the bill.

"I believe in the need for open and transparent government. Many of our citizens do not have access to the Internet," McLaurin said.

In his latest newsletter to constituents, McLaurin wrote, "Several bills have been filed in the House and Senate to allow local governments to place public notices on the Internet instead of in newspapers. I serve on the Senate State and Local Government committee where we heard one bill this week. While I am in favor of helping local governments reduce their expenses, I am concerned about transparency, open government, and citizens having access to how public business is conducted. Many citizens do not use the Internet and local newspapers still are the best source for local news."

Civitas Media, which owns the Daily Journal, opposes SB 287, and others like it that limit public notices.

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John Charles Robbins, editor of the Daily Journal, said in rural Richmond County many people still don't have easy access to the Internet and would be at risk of not receiving vital information on government actions that could possibly affect their lives. Although Richmond County is not included in SB 287, Robbins worries it could be included in later legislation.

He urged Richmond County residents who are concerned about the legislation to call their legislators, and voice objections to bills which would limit public notices, including HB 504, HB 755, SB 287 and SB 186. Ask these legislators to vote "No," and to encourage their fellow lawmakers to do the same, he said.

Their numbers are: Rep. Ken Goodman, 919-733-5823; Rep. Garland Pierce, 919-733-5803.

Find out more at www.ncpress.com/savepublicnotices.

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