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Keep public notices public

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Government isn't very good at policing itself. The public knows it and so do we. Yet a bill winding its way through the General Assembly would allow just such a thing to occur if lawmakers don't toss the bill out, along with efforts by some to tamp down openness that should and must exist in a free society.

Senate Bill 186 would allow government entities to remove public notices from newspapers and place them on their own websites, a move sponsored by Sen. Trudy Wade, R-Guilford. It is a move that lacks wisdom and slams the door shut to citizens who, in many, if not most cases, get their information about public hearings, foreclosures and myriad other important announcements through their local newspaper.

In other words, if this bill passes, the public hearing set to discuss a strip club moving into your neighborhood wouldn't be posted in the newspaper — it would be left to cities and counties to post on their governmental sites in the appropriate amount of time, and within the correct amount of space, information you, a citizen, needs to know.

And it would be up to citizens to try to wade through difficult to maneuver government websites to find the information that has always been readily accessible in newspapers, and more than likely far easier to understand.

The same would be true of public notices alerting citizens to a proposed tax hike in the upcoming budget. If the bill passes, it would be left up to government officials to notify you, the taxpayer, about their plans to spend more of your money and to take more of it too.

For decades, newspapers have been the go-to source for citizens, including those seeking information on public notices that deal with anything from foreclosures to project bids, the place where sunshine is allowed to stream into the dark crevices where governments of years past liked to do the citizens business.

SB 186 would return that business to the dark and take you, the citizens, out of the mix.

Proponents of the bill argue that it would allow government entities to save money. They are correct but only to a point. There would still be time and effort required from employees who would be saddled with posting the notices, ensuring they are kept on the site the correct amount of time, have the proper verbiage and are visible and understandable to the public they serve. In other words, they'd be given the role of watchdog over themselves. We are certain any savings isn't worth allowing that to happen.

We readily admit there's revenue at stake for us and every other newspaper in this state, but revenue is only part of the issue. The biggest part is keeping public notices public.

There is a House Bill dealing with much the same issue that is far fairer to everyone and does what is most important — maintains openness.

That bill, HB 723, preserves public notice requirements in newspapers but also requires newspapers to post those same notices online at no additional costs to government agencies. It offers governments more bang for their buck while keeping public notices in a place where they can be readily accessed by everyone.

We believe in a transparent government, and we believe it remains the newspaper's role to ensure that transparency happens.

We oppose SB 186 because it takes away public access and we hope our local lawmakers will oppose it as well, showing us, and the public they serve, that they, too, want to protect the public's right to open and readily available accessible workings of government.

Call them and let them know you want it as well:

Sen. Brent Jackson — call 919-733-5705 or email Brent.Jackson@ncleg.net

Rep. Larry Bell — call 919-733-5863 or email: Larry.Bell@ncleg.net

Rep. William Brissom — call 919-733-5772 or email William.Brisson@ncleg.net

Rep. Jimmy Dixon — call 919-715-3021 or email Jimmy.Dixon@ncleg.net

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