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Public notices must stay in newspapers

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By **The South Dakota
Newspaper Association**
Brookings, SD

SAN ANTONIO, TX—A Utah legislator told an audience of community newspaper people from across the country that they have an important, independent role to play as publishers of government public notices.

“Don’t let the fox guard the hen house,” state Sen. Stephen H. Urquhart, R-District 29, said as part of a discussion about whether government should be solely responsible for making legal notices, such as meeting minutes or bid notices available to the public.

Urquhart told publishers and editors attending the National Newspaper Association convention that the public trusts the press more than it does government.

Urquhart was chief sponsor of a 2009 bill in Utah that would have stopped publication of public notices in the state’s largest newspapers and put them only online. Two years later, he sponsored legislation to repeal the legislation.

Utah newspapers now publish public notices in print and on a centralized website that newspapers sponsored.

“The goal of public notices is transparency,” Urquhart said. “Public notices open a big window on government.”

The Utah senator said newspapers should work to make all public notices available through their newspapers and online. Doing so, he said, increases transparency about what government is doing.

For the past several years South Dakota newspapers have cooperated to upload all government public notices published in print to a searchable, aggregated website called www.sdpublicnotices.com. The state’s newspapers provide the ongoing resources to make the site available for free to the public at no cost to government.

State and local governments pay to publish public notices in legal newspapers. The rates that government pays for publication of those notices are set in state administrative rules and have not changed since 2007.

The cost for publication of public notices in newspapers can be found at the end of most published notices. The cost disclaimer is required by law.

Besides Urquhart, others speaking on a panel discussion about public notices were South Dakota Newspaper Association General Manager David Bordewyk, Detroit Legal News Publisher Bradley Thompson and Donnis Baggett, an executive with the Texas Press Association.

Bordewyk told the convention audience about the award-winning investigative reporting done by The Daily Republic in Mitchell, SD, in 2012-13. It started with an anonymous tip from someone who read in published school board minutes that the Huron school was paying its former superintendent more than \$10,000 a month.

That tip resulted in The Daily Republic reporting about a \$175,000 secret agreement between the Huron school and a former superintendent.

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