

Citizens are served by public notices in their newspapers

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The words “transparency” and “accountability” are tossed around by candidates during election campaigns. They employ them to profess their promise of the public’s right to know about the actions and intentions of government.

Yet once in office, politicians have a tendency to prefer operating behind closed doors and restricting the flow of information to the people who elected them.

In that regard, we routinely see efforts to change laws requiring that government public notices be published in local newspapers so citizens far and wide can scrutinize the nitty-gritty of zoning changes, school redistricting, contracts bid and awarded, home foreclosures, tax liens and the like.

Advocates of this effort to restrict public access to vital information want the notices posted instead on government websites and thereby save the few bucks that now go to newspapers to process and publish them in print. Of course, there’s no mention of the associated cost to taxpayers of technology and government workers needed to perform this task.

Posting public notices on government websites is contrary to the purpose of circulating the notices to as many people as possible. Few citizens routinely go to government websites, which are obscure and hard to navigate.

By contrast, newspapers and their websites reach an audience larger than at any time in the history of mass media. Yes, they charge a reasonable fee for materials (ink and paper) and for handling and distribution. But it provides a permanent record of government transactions that cannot be changed or hacked.

We often hear the expression, “an informed citizen is a better citizen.” That’s the role of newspapers in our democratic society -- to keep the public informed and up to date on those matters that affect everyday life.

The idea of posting public notices only on government websites is less about cost efficiency and more about camouflaging the activities of government. It is also akin to putting the fox in charge of the hen house in that the government – not an independent third party – would control the distribution of the notices as well as determine their content.

Trusting government officials to do the right thing is noble but we also know that laws are necessary to discourage their doing the wrong thing. That’s one reason why Georgia law requires that public notices be published in newspapers independent of the government.

It is not certain whether the fate of public notices will be brought up in the upcoming session of the Georgia General Assembly. But if it does, we would urge the lawmakers to put their constituents out front in this matter and not succumb to any move that would diminish their the public's right to know.

We would also encourage you, our readers, to contact your state representatives and state senators with a message that public notices belong in the state's newspapers in the interest of transparency and accountability.