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Citizens are served by public notices in their newspapers



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Posted: Thursday, December 25, 2014 9:58 pm

Our Opinion

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.

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Big Billy 3 days ago

This issue has two sides. Information technology is advancing beyond the "ancient" printed page. A few more generations, and it will be history. Fight it if you wish. Local Information and legal actions are to be furnished by the government free of charge and newspapers charge to publish...go to the public library or courthouse. Historically, newspapers are privately owned and charge for their sale. Libraries buy and offer copies. In the future, all government agencies will have their own website for information. Newspapers will try to offer "web papers" but I think it will evolve into something else. The changes in the laws will reflect this, to the dismay of traditional publishers.

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