You are here: Home » Editorials » Editoral: Public Notices: NOT Antiquated

HOME

ABOUT

EDITORAL: PUBLIC NOTICES: NOT ANTIQUATED

FEBRUARY 27, 2015

At *The Forum*, we've been trying to move (perhaps somewhat belatedly) into this century by updating our computers, internet speed, and website. Spoiler alert: we're also hoping to soon unveil a new way of delivering news, classifieds, and event listings to our readers using modern technology in an easily accessible form.

These plans aside, though, we are very aware that a lot of our readership does not have computer access, or the interest or wherewithal to use the internet. Therefore, it was particularly troubling to be informed this week by the New York Press Association that Governor Cuomo has proposed to eliminate newspaper public notice of proposed Constitutional amendments. Instead, the Board of Elections and the Secretary of State would post notices on their websites for a brief period prior to elections.

There are a few problems with this. As we've mentioned, a large part of this state still lacks access to the internet, and our readership is a prime example of people who are not likely to be internet-savvy. While the Governor wants to narrow the digital divide, that's going to take years and a lot of money to accomplish. Meanwhile, this proposal will be disenfranchising voters in communities where there is not a lot of computer literacy as well as in rural and economically disadvantaged areas.

Public notices may seem like an outdated way to alert people to government actions or local businesses, but newspapers publish thousands of public notices every day, and, in this country, the process has been enabling people to participate in the democratic process since the first colonial newspapers of the early 18th century. In addition to alerting people about government activity, public notices provide information about business and neighborhood activities that can absolutely affect individuals' daily lives; to name just a few types of notices: properties for sale, asset distribution, building permits, and liquor licenses. From the readers' perspective, public notices are imperative to staying informed. Full disclosure: from the newspapers' perspective, they are also crucial to staying paid. Public notices invariably account for a significant percentage, depending on the paper and the region, of a newspaper's income.

And rightfully so. The newspaper publication repeal would prevent an entire sector of our voting public from learning about proposed constitutional amendments, because it assumes that New York voters have the time, knowledge, and interest to search obscure websites for news that affects them. They do not. Most people turn to their local newspaper, especially given that current law requires that Constitutional amendment notices be published in a newspaper in each county of the state. Most of these newspapers land right on voters' doorsteps, while navigating through abstruse websites remains an unlikely feat for the average voter.

Further, newspaper publication provides an historic record, and while government websites may not be maintained long term, newspapers are preserved for posterity in libraries and archives.

Most importantly, public notices keep everyone honest. In 2014, a state Supreme Court Judge ruled that the Board of Elections included misleading language in its description of one proposed Constitutional amendment. Knowing that a government document must be published by an entity outside of the government ensures that vital information will not be slanted or misstated. And at *The Forum*, we are all about presenting our readers with correct information so that they can make the right decisions for themselves, their families, and our community.

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