

Editorial: Constitutional changes need clear airing

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Poughkeepsie Journal)

Changing the state's Constitution is one of the most profound, provocative undertakings that New York lawmakers can propose.

It should be done as carefully and openly as possible. But there is a movement afoot to make the process more secretive, to keep matters out of the public eye. Such a move must be deemed completely unacceptable.

Specifically, Gov. Andrew Cuomo is proposing to eliminate newspaper public notice of proposed constitutional amendments. To replace that tried and true method, New York would post information about the amendment on a couple of state websites. That simply won't do.

The New York News Publishers Association, which represents the publishers of New York state's newspapers and includes the Poughkeepsie Journal as a member, is strongly opposed to the idea.

Yes, the state says it can save some money this way, but the association says for the three pennies per voter it costs to run the notices, there are a slew of benefits.

The association rightly cites the fact that "broad swathes of New York State lack access to modern Internet service." Thus, such a move would disenfranchise voters in rural areas, "voters who cannot afford a home computer with broadband access and a significant number of voters who are not highly computer literate."

The association also questions whether New York voters actually will take the time to sift through state agency websites looking for the information. And it points out that newspaper publication "provides a historic record. Government websites may not be maintained long term. Newspapers are preserved in libraries and newspaper archives for posterity."

Furthermore, we are not talking about small matters here but, rather, ones that must be fully vetted and thoroughly documented. Just this past November, the state had two constitutional amendments on the ballot. One had to do with how political boundaries are reconfigured. The other, now that it has passed, will allow lawmakers to get rid of the mounds of paper needed to pass legislation.

In 2013, the state asked and received approval by the voters to expand casino operations beyond native American lands in New York. Newspapers typically do all sorts of coverage about these issues, including stories, running letters to the editor and perhaps offering their own views through editorials. But current law requires that all constitutional amendment notices, in their entirety, be disseminated through a newspaper in each county of the state. That provides an important guarantee to the people of the state, even in rural counties where news coverage is not as prevalent.

Amending the state Constitution isn't easy, nor should it be. It requires consecutive approvals by the state Legislature and then the blessing of the voters at the polls. Legislators have plenty of information at their disposal before deciding how they are going to vote on a given subject, including efforts to amend the state Constitution. The voters need all the relevant information in their hands as well.

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