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# Editorial: Why proposed public notice changes bad for taxpayers

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Posted: Saturday, May 16, 2015 11:00 pm

The Dispatch and The Rock Island Argus

Managing Editor Roger Ruthhart called readers’ attention in his Feb. 22 column to a piece of bad government legislation that would have eliminated public notices from newspapers and allowed them to be posted on the nearly 8,000 government websites in the state.

Public notices provide checks and balances that prevent governments from taking actions that impact our lives without telling us about them, he warned. Significant tax increases, annual budgets, bids for large projects, changes in local zoning, election information and new laws that are passed are just some of the actions that require a public notice.



At present, notices published in newspapers around the state also are available at one location — [PublicNoticeIllinois.com](#) -- which is a searchable statewide database operated by the newspaper industry.

Illinois House Bill 261 would have done away with that and allowed units of local government to post public notices on their own websites and not require newspaper publication. The bill would have repealed the placement of public notices on one statewide site and resulted in public notices being scattered.

Fortunately, there was a statewide uproar and HB261 failed to make it out of committee thanks to wise legislators including our own Rep. Pat Verschoore, D-Milan. But now we are hearing that the measure may reemerge.

The new argument is that publishing legal notices is an unfunded mandate and the governor’s Local Government and Consolidation and Unfunded Mandate Task Force is expected to support the legislation.

Proponents have argued that being required to share with the taxpayers what they are doing on their behalf is an unfunded mandate and that government units can save money by eliminating it. The Illinois Municipal League has asked members to provide annual costs for publication of these notices. While there is

no question this is a source of revenue for newspapers, the bigger concern should be that it will eliminate one way you can keep an eye on what your local units of government are doing.

Proponents also say publishing notices in newspapers means you only can see them on the day they are published. It ignores the fact that, for example, this newspaper’s legal notices are also posted on Quad-Cities Online as well as on the statewide site and remain there.

In his original column, Mr. Ruthhart said passage of this law would scatter public notices across up to 8,000 online locations, making it much more difficult for you to keep track of what local government was up to. In fact, it is far worse than that.

Many of our local units of government don’t even have a website, others just provide static information and still others are months out of date. Illinois’ Open Meetings Act requires posting of notices online if a government entity has a website.

## Hidden costs quickly add up

If new legislation requires online posting, presumably the law must also require local governments — many of them small and understaffed -- to pay to have websites created and then pay more to maintain and update them. Doesn’t sound like savings to us.

Here are some examples discovered in a recent review of Western Illinois government websites:

-- Port Byron and Viola have no agendas or minutes on their website.

-- Atkinson’s website is reporting that the clerk’s office will be closed Sept. 19 and 22 and minutes haven’t been posted since January 2012.

-- ew Boston, New Windsor, Cleveland, Seaton, Illinois City, Reynolds, Joy, Oak Grove, Galva and Albany have no websites. Bishop Hill has great tourism information but no agendas or minutes.

Website information is just as scarce when it comes to township government.

As of this writing:

-- South Moline Township has not posted an agenda since April 2014 and no minutes since May 2014.

-- In Rock Island County alone, the townships of Edgington, Bowling, Black Hawk, Coal Valley, Rural, Western, Colona, Hanna and Zuma have no websites.

A similar audit by the Citizens Advocacy Center of more than 750 Illinois public body websites found only 73 percent complied with the basic notice of upcoming meetings. Only 57 percent complied with posting meeting agenda and only 48 percent complied with posting approved meeting minutes.

This effort to remove public information from newspapers and their websites remains ill-conceived and will be ineffective. It will make Illinois governments less transparent.

When local governments want to get news out to constituents, they don’t bury it somewhere on a website -- they take it to the media. We are a proven and dependable source of information that taxpayers rely on. Residents can’t depend on finding information in websites with such a poor record of performance, or sites that don’t exist at all.

We encourage Gov. Bruce Rauner, and our state and local elected officials, to remove this bad public policy from the proposed legislation. Illinois, perhaps more than any other state, should be erring on the side of transparency and good government.

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