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# Our say: Printed tax sale notices are irreplaceable 🇺🇸



County Executive Steve Schuh wants to change public notice of tax sales by taking them out of newspapers. (By Matthew Cole / Staff)

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Our say: Printed tax sale notices can't be replaced by online postings

JANUARY 31, 2016

Few will object when County Executive Steve Schuh says he wants to cut fees and slice red tape. It's a different matter when he wants to greatly reduce government transparency about transactions that could cost people their homes and property.

The law requires that when a property is going to be publicly auctioned to pay taxes, notices must run once a week for four consecutive weeks in two newspapers widely distributed in the county. *The Capital* is one of numerous newspapers in this state that run such ads.

Schuh has asked the county's senators to put in legislation — Senate Bill 142 — that would replace the publication requirement with a rule that the notice be placed on the county's website. He says this would eliminate the nearly \$140,000 a year the county spends on the ads. Those costs are carried over to a \$100 fee charged to the property buyers.

First, maintaining or expanding a government website is not free. The taxpayers pay for the development, the maintenance, the servers, the software licenses, the technical support, the customer service, and on and on.

But much more importantly, no website — government or not — can replace printed notices. We know there's a growing perception "everyone" has online access. But that's not true.

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the county website, how many would ever see them — let alone stumble on information that the house down the street, or a mother's home, was about to be auctioned off to pay back taxes?

Pew Research reported last year that 15 percent of Americans — that would be more than 48 million people — don't use the Web at all. That goes up to 20 percent of African-Americans, a quarter of those living in rural areas, a third of the poorly educated and almost 40 percent of those 65 and older.

Local newspapers strive to attract readers. Their existence depends on it. Governments have no similar incentive to get people to look at their websites. If tax sale notices were posted on some nook of

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Also, newspapers are independent. Public notices on a government website can't be independent of the political forces running that government. Even if you exclude deliberate manipulation, content can be altered or lost because of equipment failure or obsolescence. There will be no enduring, reliable written record.

Printed tax sale notices, incidentally, go online as well. Each print ad we get is automatically posted on [capitalgazette.com](#) and on the Maryland Delaware DC Press Association site specifically created for public notices. But we don't imagine that's where most people are going to see them.

Again, we're talking about notices of the government seizing homes and property. The county should be doing more to notify residents about this, not less — and not leaning back and saying, "Oh, they can see it on our website."

We oppose government moves that endanger the public's right to know what the government is up to, and we'd oppose this one even if it wasn't going to cost us a penny. This county's history should have taught us a few things about the importance of transparency. Schuh should think better of this and ask that Senate Bill 142 be withdrawn; if he doesn't, county legislators should reject it.

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