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NEWS

Local government wants to cancel advertising requirement



Local government officials want the province to relax laws that require them to advertise pending changes and decisions in local newspapers. — Image Credit: John McKinley

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posted Feb 19, 2016 at 5:42 PM

Expensive, unnecessary relic of a dying era, or a crucial component in the fight to keep the public informed and local government accountable?

That defines how the lines are being drawn on B.C.'s latest media battle front.

Politicians want to end the statutory practice of local government advertising in local newspapers.

As it stands today, the Local Government Act requires municipalities and regional districts to notify the public of many pending changes or decisions through a paid ad.

But last fall, the Union of B.C. Municipalities endorsed a motion to change that requirement. Instead, it wants the government to allow communities to use a variety of media to circulate their notices, providing they prove that they can reach the same or more residents as newspapers.

"I think the newspaper avenue for advertising is almost past and I think we should look at other venues for notification," Maple Ridge Coun. Craig Speirs said. "I think we're wasting our money with newspaper advertising, quite frankly."

Closer to home, the Cowichan Valley Regional District recently endorsed a policy shift that would enable local governments to choose their own manner of providing public notice "tailored to best serve their local communities."

The CVRD's motion, which will be forwarded to the Association of Vancouver Island Municipalities for endorsement, comes with a slightly different motivation.

Newspaper circulation areas that do not necessarily align with regional district boundaries make it "challenging" to meet the legal requirement, the CVRD states, adding the closure of regional papers is also a factor.

A Vancouver Island seniors advocate said the proposed change indicates a disregard for seniors.

"Many seniors are not connected online and still look to the newspapers for information that's important to them," Vicki Holman, executive director of the Cowichan Seniors Community Foundation said.

"If they take the public notices out of the local newspapers, many of our seniors will be oblivious to what the regional district is doing, including its hospital development programs which are very important to seniors," she said.

The preamble to the resolution endorsed by the UBCM says that, "printed newspapers are no longer the only or most effective means of giving public notice."

Tim Shoults, president of the B.C. and Yukon Community Newspapers Association, disputes that.

He said engagement is three times higher from print compared to online material.

And online notices are only effective if people know where to look, he added. However, he agrees there should be a mix of media used for notifying the public.

"Reducing statutory advertising in newspapers ... will harm the newspaper's ability to serve those communities and cover local government."

Social media companies such as Facebook and Google "don't create any local content and they don't pay professionals to create the local content and to cover local government."

He said 79 per cent of English speaking adults in B.C. have read a community paper in the past week.

Statutory advertising "keeps local government accountable," he said.

"We still have the best reach in the community," Maple Ridge News publisher Jim Coulter said. "We get to every door step. Who else does that?"

— Robert Barron and Phil Melnychuk Black Press

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Sandy Macdougall · College of hard knocks, majored in experience
Maple Ridge Coun. Frank Speirs? My God. Do you mean we now have two of them? Did Craig mutate or something? I thought one was actually way too many Speirs.

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John McKinley
Error corrected. Thank you.

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Sandy Macdougall · College of hard knocks, majored in experience
John McKinley I'm simply grateful to learn we still only have one self-admitted pot smoking, wine drinking member of our local council in Maple Ridge.

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Katherine Whitworth · Victoria, British Columbia
I am totally in favour of retaining mandatory advertising for municipalities. You cannot count on "social media" to be the "be-all-end-all" in terms of advertising. It requires the general public to "Like" or "Follow" something. Not necessarily an easy task for a resident who might only be interested in one thing, not a zillion things that come out through social media. Every Thursday I look to read the agenda for Monday night at Saanich in the Times Colonist. Saanich does not advertise this item in the municipal news, however they may advertise a municipal open house/town hall regarding some other issue. A multitude of possibilities. So lets keep this for now.

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Pete Cassidy · Paynesville, Victoria
As long as a community has a paper, advertising bylaw changes should be a requirement. As much as big tech wants us all to be 'connected', not all of us want to be forced to stare at a screen just so we don't miss something.

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Robert Richardson
"He said 79 per cent of English speaking adults in B.C. have read a community paper in the past week."

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