

AARP, A Threat to Open Government (1.1.12)

Thousands of Tennesseans could be left out of the public information loop by proposals pending in the state legislature, and Fred Fields wants to keep that from happening.

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His concern is with bills that would let city, county and state governments post public notices required by law only on the Internet rather than in newspapers. That could happen if public notice bills catch fire during the General Assembly session that starts Jan. 10.

"There are a lot of people, especially older people, who ... do not even have a computer within their house," said Fields, 73, an eight-year AARP Tennessee volunteer advocacy leader from Norris. "They are totally electronically isolated, and they do not have use of the Internet."

Public notices include announcements about upcoming government meetings, zoning plans and bidding proposals.

Defenders of the bills say they are trying to lower the costs of publication and to keep up with technology. Opponents see the bills as an infringement on open government.

Fields, a former journalist and semiretired lawyer, serves as the AARP representative on the Tennessee Advisory Committee on Open Government, which advises the state's Office of Open Records Counsel.

During last year's legislative session, he and other AARP Tennessee volunteer advocates fought against 19 bills that would have reduced the requirements for public notices. He plans to do so again if needed.

Shelly Courington, AARP Tennessee advocacy director, said AARP volunteers are critical because "they know their legislators. They are key because they vote. They are key because they are informed."

Defeating the public notice bills will again be a top priority for AARP Tennessee and its volunteers.

Sens. Stacey Campfield, R-Knoxville, and Bo Watson, R-Hixson, each sponsored a public notice bill last year.

The Campfield bill would have created a pilot project to post public notices online only, not in print, in Knox County from September 2011 through August 2013. The Watson bill applied only to Hamilton County and its cities. Neither bill reached the floor.

Watson said he proposed his bill because Hamilton County officials asked for it as a way to save money. "Obviously, the ability to publish a public notice electronically is far less expensive than in print."

Watson said he will not push his original bill this session but may introduce a bill to have a central website for all levels of government in Tennessee to post public notices.