

Auditor general: Keep public notices in newspapers

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Editor's note: The following letter was sent by state Auditor General Jack Wagner to members of the state House Local Government Committee regarding House Bill 633.

As Pennsylvania's independent fiscal watchdog, I generally applaud efforts by the General Assembly to hold down spending and save taxpayer money, but there are exceptions to every rule.

Such is the case with House Bill 633, which would eliminate the requirement that school districts and local and state governments place public advertisements in newspapers advising the public of their intended actions.

While there may be some validity to the argument that posting these notices on the Internet would save money, the financial benefits would be dwarfed by the drawbacks to this plan. Most worrisome to me would be the reduction in government transparency and the inevitable loss in public confidence that it would engender.

There is no argument that more Americans are turning to the Internet for information, but usage declines rapidly according to age. For instance, about half of adults aged 18 to 49 use the Internet every day, but that usage falls to 44 percent for those aged 50 to 64 and to 17 percent for those 65 and older.

By comparison, about 40 percent of all Americans read a newspaper every day, but that usage rises with age. Daily readership is 52 percent for those aged 35 to 54, 58 percent for those 55 to 64 and over 75 percent for those 65 and older.

These demographic numbers are especially significant in Pennsylvania, which has an older population than the national average, and they indicate that it will be many years before the Internet overtakes daily newspapers as the primary source of local news in most Pennsylvania communities.

I am particularly concerned about any public perceptions of less transparency in government because, as auditor general, several of my most important audits and reports have highlighted this issue. We documented instances of the Gaming Control Board's violating the Sunshine Act, the Turnpike Commission's removing fare information from toll tickets, and numerous state agencies failing to adequately publicize contracting opportunities to potential vendors.

House Bill 633, if enacted, would be another setback in making government more open and accountable to the public. Citizens interested in reviewing public notices would have to visit multiple websites to obtain the information they are seeking. This is not convenient and will decrease, rather than increase, bidding competition. In short, it's a bad deal for taxpayers.

Conversely, I would wholeheartedly support any legislation that requires school districts and other government agencies to post public notices on the Internet IN ADDITION to posting legal notices in newspapers. I believe this would increase transparency and make government more open and accountable to taxpayers.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views on this important legislation with you and members of your committee. As always, my department and I are available to assist in any way in finding solutions that save taxpayer money while making government more open, efficient, and accountable to those it serves.

Jack Wagner is Auditor General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.