

The Democrat Herald

Editors Letter: That public notice worked

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Wednesday's story about math errors in a published budget notice came about because a reader noticed. In other words, the public notice worked. It got somebody's attention.

The city of Albany had the notice published in the Democrat-Herald as required by state budget law. It gave notice of a June 9 public hearing on the city fiscal plan for next year.

The mistakes were not huge or even material. In a comparison of seven main funds, most of the percentage changes were off, some because of a misplaced decimal point and others because the calculation evidently was based on numbers other than those in the table. The city finance office explained there had been some confusion because of the handoff from a retiring and vacationing employee to another.

The reader who noticed is Jim Colley, who has a business called Zera Engineering P.C. I asked him if he minded being identified in the paper and what kind of engineering he did.

His reply:

"No, I don't mind being identified. I'm an electronics engineer; I have my own (very small) business designing integrated circuits on a contract basis.

"My goal here is just to correct the data, and not to assign blame Lord knows I've made more than my share of mistakes with data."

This little story serves as a starting point for more on public notices, those blocks of small and dense type that often run in the back of the classified ad section.

They are also known as legal notices because by and large, their publication is required by law in order to make sure that certain things are not done without the public having some idea — things like holding a public hearing on a governmental action, or foreclosing on somebody's property.

Foreclosure notices, unfortunately, have dominated the legal notices lately.

The notices are published in the smallest possible type because the people or institutions are required by law to place them and are charged by the space they take.

This makes them generally hard to read, and that's unfortunate.

The law also governs exactly what information must be included in legal notices. That too makes for some pretty wooden reading.

Foreclosure notices, for example, always include the legal description of the property affected, sometimes complete with compass directions as well as rods, chains and sometimes iron pipes.

This is required, presumably, to make absolutely sure that the right property is being described. But nobody in the public has the slightest idea where the place is until they come to the address.

The law also tightly governs what must be published in a budget notice like the one that drew Jim Colley's attention in the paper Tuesday.

The law allows for two different formats, Finance Director Stewart Taylor told me. He says he picked the better one but both have shortcomings in conveying useful information.

We know from Mr. Colley's experience that public notices serve a useful function. Now all we need are reasonable legal reforms to make them give more information and also make them easier to read. (hh)