

Public notice: Newspapers deliver on the people's right to know

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Last Thursday, the Carlynton School District told the public it was accepting sealed bids from contractors for the replacement of sidewalks and a running track surface.

On Wednesday, Pittsburgh's Citizen Police Review Board, which investigates complaints about police conduct, alerted residents that it would hold its next regular meeting on June 22.

On Tuesday, people were told where to file any objections to the plan by a company called Clearwire to install telecommunication antennas on five high rooftops in the Pittsburgh area.

All of these public notices appeared in the Post-Gazette and possibly elsewhere because the state requires governments and some agencies dealing with them to advertise important items and activities -- like meetings, budgets, elections, contracts and proposals -- in newspapers of general circulation. Not only is such advertising the law, but it's also a tradition that has kept the public informed for more than 200 years.

Pennsylvania would change it only at its peril.

Yet some legislators would like to see the public notice requirement abolished, relaxed or revised. At least five bills have been introduced in the Legislature, each of which would remove public notices from newspapers of general circulation.

Would newspapers lose revenue from such an action? Yes, but a far greater loss would be the public's awareness of government activity and decision-making, much of it in their own communities.

Some government associations, echoed by various lawmakers, argue that they could save a little money by posting the notices on their own websites for free or on a common public notice site. We say the more notice the merrier, but too many people, even in the digital age, do not use the Internet -- 57 percent of adults over 65 (according to the Pew Research Center), 49 percent of African-Americans and 52 percent of Hispanics (according to the U.S. Census). In fact, AARP Pennsylvania is opposed to changes in the public notice requirement because the potential benefits would be outstripped by leaving too many Pennsylvanians, particularly those who are older or disabled, in the dark.

The other pitfall to letting the self-posting of public notices on government websites suffice is Pennsylvania has more than 1,000 municipalities, 500 school districts, 67 counties and untold quasi-independent authorities and commissions. Good luck to citizens in chasing down public notices across the virtual landscape -- and in trying to root out those items that inevitably will be hidden or buried for nefarious reasons by some government officials.

Fortunately, a compromise measure, House Bill 1876, would keep public notices where people are used to finding them -- in newspapers. In response to the cost issue raised by some local governments, the legislation would cut the papers' rates for such ads by 25 percent, freeze the rates for three years, then hold future increases to the cost of living. After being passed by the House in November, the plan is now in the Senate Local Government Committee.

No one should be heartbroken, though, if the bill never reaches the Senate floor. Some lawmakers are using the general issue to get at newspapers for strong coverage of the 2005 pay raise, the corruption investigation of the Legislature and other assorted embarrassments. Talk about petty political payback.

What's at stake in any loss of newspaper public notices is the people's right to know. If Pennsylvanians are best served by notices of school board meetings, township contracts and local zoning changes all being delivered by a free and independent press, then which elected officials would dare take them away?

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