



SCA should rethink quest for public notice waiver

Published: June 24, 2010

It sounds like a frugal maneuver, one taxpayers would appreciate, particularly in this tough economy and with the looming state pension payout.

However, Southern Columbia Area School District's decision to seek a waiver from the Department of Education that would allow advertisements and public notices to be posted on the district website rather than in local newspapers is misguided and will not adequately serve the public.

While this opinion sounds self-serving coming from a newspaper, there is ample evidence to the contrary.

Other local governmental bodies have asked the Legislature to repeal the current public notice law that requires the advertising of government business in newspapers of general circulation, which they say is a needless cost. Like Southern, they want to be able to post meeting notices and other legal advertising on their own websites.

But the issue is public access to information rather than costs. And those governments' own failure to comply with Internet-posting requirements of the state's new Open Records Law demonstrates the inadequacy of self-posting to inform the public.

The new law requires all public agencies to post online contact information for the government's right-to-know officer and the state Office of Open Records, the policy for requests and a form to make requests. The Pennsylvania Freedom of Information Coalition conducted an audit of websites for the commonwealth's 67 counties. It found that, a year after the new law was enacted, fewer than half of counties had fully complied with online requirements, and that 15 counties had posted no right-to know-information. One county had no website.

Counties are among the largest and best-financed local governments. If they can't manage to post even simple state-mandated information on websites, what are their prospects, and those of smaller units of government, to faithfully post public meeting notices and other legal notices?

The newspaper industry itself already operates a website, www.mypublicnotices.com, that posts, at no cost to governments, legal ads that appear in every newspaper in every state.

Pennsylvania's AARP director in April joined the chorus of groups opposed to the change in the public notice policy, arguing that, "It is important that all citizens have the ability to know what actions and proposals are being considered by government entities. The public accesses this information in a variety of ways, but one method that is important, especially to older citizens, is through publication in local newspapers."

Southern needs to heed that argument. The board has just approved a tax increase and has seen its share of controversy regarding its building project, among other contentious subjects in the past several years. In addition, given the atmosphere of government reform that is prevalent statewide, the timing for this change in how the public is informed of school business is as poor as the idea itself.