

Jconline.com, Editorial: A public step back on notices (9.17.12)

Proposals to drop a form of public notice, such as one the Indiana Department of Environmental Management says it plans to dump later this year, at first seem to amount to grudge matches between public agencies and the media.

To a certain extent, they are. The newspaper world is never going to clap and cheer when a state agency announces it will get rid of the sort of agate-type, paid notices that have populated the back pages for ages.

In this case, IDEM officials say they will drop public notices about hearings on air quality policy changes by the end of the year. The notices, IDEM officials say, are obsolete. The anticipated savings, statewide: About \$7,500 a year.

Fair enough. State officials are looking to pinch a penny wherever possible. And granted, newspapers aren't in a make-or-break situation with a combined \$7,500 a year.

But the bottom line here is less about the state and media butting heads and more about making sure the public isn't losing an outlet for announcements about changes in rules and compliance for air quality measurements.

The secondary line might be even more important: Once state agencies find reason to trim public notices in one place, they have a tendency to want to trim other public notices.

That's why 18 environmental and public interest groups are protesting the pending notification changes. It's not as if the IDEM is dropping notification. It still would post notices on its website, send postcards to those who asked for direct notification and maintain email lists.

But the public interest isn't served in this case. And it certainly isn't helped by the notice the new policy serves — that the state might be aiming to strip other ways to tell the public about the meat and potatoes of government action.