

Newspapers best for public notices

Most newspaper readers are familiar with public notices, but have you ever asked yourself why they're important — to you and other taxpayers?

Public notices are not simply intended to provide information for vendors — that cities, counties or other entities are seeking bids on projects — they inform the public about government expenditures and taxation, environmental issues, public meetings, elections and other important matters.

Those public notices are there to keep you informed about how local government is spending your tax dollars and to raise awareness about governmental and corporate projects and activities that impact the environment — the air we breathe, our water supply and the kind of world we will leave to future generations.

Those are important issues, which is why Texas' governmental entities are required to print notices of their plans for actions ranging from annexation to zoning and from large expenditures to tax hikes.

Ever since Texas declared its independence, notices of governmental intent have been printed in newspapers to get the word out efficiently to as many people as possible through a non-governmental medium. Newspapers, not the maze of a difficult-to-navigate government websites, are still the best way to get the job done.

Most of the state's 500 or so newspapers print public notices — and print them at their lowest classified advertising rate, as required by law, according to the Texas Press Association.

These days, newspapers also post legal notices on their websites, for the convenience of those who choose to read the paper electronically. And for commercial enterprises that do business with governments outside of their home county, the Texas Press Association maintains a free statewide compilation of legal notices from all over the state.

There is some cost involved to print a newspaper notice, of course. The expenses of paper, ink, personnel and delivery are very real, and like any other business, newspapers must charge for what they provide if they want to continue serving the public.

Public notices published in newspapers are an affordable and efficient method to keep the public notified about important issues — they represent a fraction of local governments' budgets. It's a small price to pay to help guarantee that transparency and open government continue to be the cornerstones of our democracy.

For several years, lobbying efforts have been under way to undermine these cornerstones. Some state agencies and some associations representing local governments are pressuring legislators to eliminate printed public notices in newspapers, saying they should be allowed to “publish” notices solely on their government-owned, government-controlled and government-operated websites.

These changes to the public notice laws will result in reduced transparency, open government protections and oversight. Removing procurement-related public notices from newspapers will disenfranchise minorities, the disabled, the elderly and those in rural communities — all of whom have statistically lower Internet access.

It's ironic that the associations lobbying to kill printed notices are funded primarily by dues paid by local governments — governments that get their money by taxing the very citizens who would find it difficult to keep an eye on city hall if legal notices were no longer printed.

People have a right to information about their government. That's why we need public notices and why placing these notices in newspapers is the most efficient and economical way to distribute this information to the general populace.

Informed citizens have the ultimate power in a democratic government.