

The Gonzales Cannon, Public notices a key to an informed citizen (11.15.12)

An informed citizen is the ultimate source of power in a democratic government, 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.

For several years, lobbying efforts have been underway to eliminate this essential element of government transparency, which bodes ill for an informed electorate. 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.

Ever since Texas declared its independence, notices of governmental intent have been printed in newspapers to get the word out efficiently to as many citizens as possible through a non-governmental medium. Newspapers — not obscure pages in the maze of a difficult-to-navigate government website — are still the best way to do this.

Most citizens who are vigilant about government activities also happen to be avid newspaper readers. They are well served by the fact that 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.

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 or close their doors. There's no difference between a local government paying a newspaper for a printed legal notice and paying an automobile dealer for police cars...except for price.

When it comes to printed public notice, that price is miniscule. In 2011 Texas counties spent an average of 0.00533 percent of their budgets on legal notices regarding procurement. To put that in perspective, imagine that the height of the Empire State Building represents the total budget of a Texas county. Now visualize the height of a thumbtack, and consider this: 0.00533 percent of the height of the Empire State Building would be the height of the thumbtack.

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

Legislators considering this issue should consider the Empire State Building and the thumbtack. And citizens should remind lawmakers that a thumbtack serves a useful purpose and never causes a problem...unless you happen to sit on it.

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