

NWI, Put public notices where public will find them (8.16.12)

The Indiana Department of Environmental Management's Office of Air Quality has decided to post notices of public hearings exclusively on its website and no longer in the media. In doing so, the agency has made the public's business much more difficult to follow.

This is a bad idea.

The Hoosier State Press Association met with the Office of Air Quality's Scott Deloney and Chris Pedersen after the agency said in a public notice that it plans to stop publishing notices after Dec. 1.

Deloney and Pedersen raised concerns about the speed at which some newspapers were sending proof of publication. HSPA Executive Director and General Counsel Steve Key offered a good solution. The HSPA's advertising service, Midwest Advertising Placements, could handle that for the Office of Air Quality at no cost to the government. Problem solved, right? But the bureaucrats declined.

Deloney and Pedersen also took issue with the cost, \$7,500. We understand their desire to trim government costs, but it can't be done at the unacceptable cost of keeping the public in the dark about the government's business.

What Deloney and Petersen have lost sight of is they're doing the public's business. And when the general public doesn't see what government is up to, the public has little input into the process. Instead, the special interest groups that watch the online notices carefully would be those to influence public policy.

It's easy to understand why bureaucrats would want to stop letting the public know about public hearings, such as those the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency requires Indiana's Office of Air Quality to hold. But this isn't about bureaucrats' convenience; this is about making sure the public has ample opportunity to monitor what's being done on their behalf and at least speak their mind, if not determine state policies.

Publishing public notices online, but not in the newspapers easily accessible to the general public, would keep special interest groups in the loop, but not the general public.

IDEM should heed the HSPA's advice on how to get the notices published quickly in the state's newspapers and get good customer service afterward.