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Newspapers best way to publish public notices

Posted March 12, 2013 at 11:26 a.m.

Print A A A   



Transparency in government is a big push these days as South Carolina citizens demand improved access to public meetings and documents.

Both houses of the legislature are studying reform, and the Governor's Commission on Ethics Reform has issued recommendations on ethics and openness.

However, one important area of open government is often forgotten, and that is public notices.

The law now requires that many government notices be published in local newspapers so citizens can be informed. Public notices do more than tell citizens when a government body will meet. If you read the legal notices in your local newspaper, you'll see quite a variety during the course of a year, including tax liens, foreclosures, public hearings, public comment periods, liquor license applications, air and water quality permits and results, unserved warrants, zoning issues and changes in codes.

The list of topics that must be advertised by local and state governments is varied, but the topics share one thing: they all relate to information citizens need to know.

A bill pending in the House of Representatives would move the bulk of public notice advertising from local newspapers to government websites.

Here's the problem: no one will see public notices if they are moved to the Internet.

A couple of years ago, a head-to-head test was done in Darlington County, showing newspaper public notice outperforming online public notice by a 7 to 1.

In the test, the sheriff put the names of 200 citizens with unserved warrants in the newspaper. He put 200 different names on the sheriff's department website. Of those printed in the newspaper, 70 citizens came forward to deal with their unserved warrants, a response rate of 35 percent. Of those whose names were listed on the Web page, only



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10 came forward. This was a 5 percent response rate.

This test reaffirms that few will read legal ads on the Internet.

Putting legal ads on the Internet would mean that only South Carolinians with computer access would have access to this important information. In our state, only 46 percent of farms have access to the Internet. We rank third from the bottom among all states in farm Internet access.

And even if citizens do have a computer, they must make the effort to find multiple Internet sites. Legal ads for an entire community are usually found in a particular section of the paper, which is easy to find. If each government agency posts its own legal notices, there won't be a comprehensive way for the public to access notices.

In newspapers, section headers direct readers to legal notices, so you can actually find them. They're in your hand, so you can verify that a notice was published unlike a website, which can be tampered with quite easily by hackers. And printed legal notice information can't be lost or altered.

There is a cost to public notice advertising, but it is a reasonable price to pay for the public to be kept informed. The true cost to citizens of posting public notice on websites may be far higher than that of a print advertisement it might just be their democracy.

Bill Rogers is executive director of the S.C. Press Association, an advocate for open government and the trade group for the state's newspapers.

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