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# Public notice bills threaten people's right to know

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Posted: Wednesday, April 17, 2013 11:50 am

By Vanessa C. Shortley News of Orange editor v.shortley@newsfororange.com

Posted on April 17, 2013 by Vanessa Shortley

Ordinary people have the right to know what their government is doing.

But that right to knowledge is in jeopardy from a slew of bills making their way through the state legislature.

At their heart, these bills would make it harder for the average person to find out about public hearings, elections, rezonings and other matters of public concerns by taking them out of newspapers. Instead, such things would be published on government-controlled websites.

This is wrong.

People need to know what is going on in local government and in their communities. Public notices serve that purpose, but putting them solely on the Internet diminishes their visibility.

How so? Well, if these bills are approved, government bodies—such as the county commissioners or town board—would no longer have to publish their notices in the newspaper. Instead, they'd be allowed to just pop them on the web where—and this is the crux of the issue—fewer people would see them; more than 50 percent of U.S. residents have never reviewed a local, state or federal government website, according to the Public Notice Resource Center.

That's staggering. And there's no reason to think people would suddenly start flocking to these pages if public notices were placed on them.

True, newspapers do stand to lose revenue if governments pull public notices, and cost savings are part of the reason some state legislators are interested in this proposal. But there are larger issues at work, here.

Now, there's nothing wrong with putting these things online. I actually think that's a great idea, especially for tech-savvy individuals who could set up RSS alerts for topics that interest them. But the Internet shouldn't be the only way people find out about what's going on with their government, and the government certainly shouldn't be allowed to control the public notice process.

Additionally, not everyone has a computer at home or access to the Internet. This is especially true in our rural communities, which often have to rely on dial-up or spotty web service. Putting public notices only online denies these people the ability to read them and infringes upon their right to know.

Newspapers are widely available and accessible to everyone; the library even offers copies to read for free. We represent an impartial, independent source of information that the government can't and doesn't control.

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As Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle noted, "Burke said there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than them all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact, very momentous to us in these times."

Help us continue to do our jobs in keeping you informed. Contact your local legislators, and let them know you are against the government removing public notices from newspapers.

Officials representing Orange County are:

- Rep. Verla Insko, District 56  
Phone: 919-733-7208  
Email: [verla.inkso@ncleg.net](mailto:verla.inkso@ncleg.net)  
Mailing address: NC House of Representatives  
300 N. Salisbury Street, Room 502  
Raleigh, NC 27603-5925

- Rep. Valerie Foushee, District 50  
Phone: 919-715-3019  
Email: [valerie.foushee@ncleg.net](mailto:valerie.foushee@ncleg.net)  
Mailing address: NC House of Representatives  
16 W. Jones Street, Room 1111  
Raleigh, NC 27601-1096

- Sen. Ellie Kinnaird, District 23  
Phone: 919-733-5804  
Email: [ellie.kinnaird@ncleg.net](mailto:ellie.kinnaird@ncleg.net)  
Mailing address: NC Senate  
300 N. Salisbury Street, Room 628  
Raleigh, NC 27603-5925

Not sure who your representatives are? Go to <http://bit.ly/UVOtn8>.

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