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Public notices for timber sales should stay in DNR's budget

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May 08, 2013 11:28 am • by Matt Johnson, matt.johnson@lee.net (0) Comments

One of government's best tools for informing the public is through public notices in newspapers. Some government agencies try to wiggle out of their public notice obligations by seeking to place public notices on websites.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' proposed budget includes a plan that would eliminate public notices in newspapers announcing the sale of state-owned timber in the county where the timber is being sold. It's obvious this would harm the residents of the county. County residents don't comb through state websites to see if timber is being sold locally — they look for that in their community newspaper.

Keeping the public informed is a solemn obligation. Allowing government to inform the public without objective supervision is perilous.

In the last legislative session, the DNR attempted to eliminate water permit notices and navigable water notices in newspapers. The DNR wanted to put those notices on its website. That measure was not approved.

Taking away the requirement for governments to post a notice in a newspaper removes the third-party oversight provided by the newspaper and the independent proof of publication for that public notice. The notices published in newspapers are already being put on the Internet. The Wisconsin Newspaper Association augments public notice publication with postings on its websites.

Governments, by statute, must adopt official newspapers to fulfill the duty of providing public notices and informing the public. Changing this aspect of how the DNR handles its notices will lead to the erosion of more public notices.

Newspapers are not richly rewarded for providing public notices. The Department of Administration rates for publishing notices barely offsets the paper, ink and clerical time required to print public notices. Newspapers serve an important role watching over government at all levels. Publishing public notices, and protecting them for the citizenry, is a part of this role.

The proposal to abandon public notices for the sale of state-owned timber should be eliminated from the DNR budget by the Joint Finance Committee.

The DNR's effort to erode the state's public notice laws needs to end.

Tags Public Notices, Wisconsin Department Of Natural Resources', State-owned Timber



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