

Thom Goolsby - Public notices for everyone, not just those online

By Thom Goolsby

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Several local governments are attempting to rewrite the laws on public notice. They claim that they can save money by not advertising their actions in local newspapers. Instead, municipal officials want to give the taxpayers notice of city and county activities on their own government websites.

Senate Bill 287, a proposed law entitled "Notice Publication by Some Local Governments," was recently heard in the Senate State and Local Government Committee. The new legislation attempts to change long-standing laws requiring citizens to be notified of important government activities in writing.

Currently, local officials must advertise in a paper of general circulation various public hearings and meetings involving things like the adoption of budget ordinances, the sale and disposition of government property, purchasing and contract bids, tax assessments, development agreements, referendums in special elections, as well as the dates of primary, general and special elections.

The new law seeks to end this mandate. Instead, it would allow cities and counties to advertise these important government functions by "electronic means," in lieu of newspaper or other statutorily required publication.

As you might guess, local politicians and bureaucrats were lined up at the committee meeting to praise the legislation. They gushed about how efficient it would be and how much money they would save if all they had to do was publish notice of these events on their own websites.

None of them were concerned that in some parts of North Carolina only half the population has access to a computer. In other words, they were saying, "Hey, we are in the electronic age now! The old printing press is a thing of the past. Now everything is about websites and the Internet."

However, even in the electronic age, it is nice to have a hard copy of a real newspaper advertising a government event or activity. It provides proof that something is really taking place. Unlike multiple websites that may or may not be intelligently designed or properly linked, a newspaper is a newspaper.

It is not unheard of for government to be penny wise and pound-foolish. In this age of bloated bureaucracies and out-of-control spending, some things are just worth the money. The public has a right to know what its government is doing. Whenever officials and bureaucrats line up to tell you that they want to save you money by obscuring their activities, you should be wary. In its current form, this bill is a bad deal.

The good news is that the committee chairman, Sen. Jim Davis, pulled the legislation and told the sponsors to continue to work on it. Hopefully, a compromise will be forthcoming that protects the public's right to know what its government is doing and allows for some cost savings to the taxpayer.



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