

Rusty Cunningham: Your right to know: Keep public notices in print

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For more than two centuries, governments in this country have paid newspapers to publish public notices about the actions of government.

But now, Wisconsin state legislators are circulating a pair of bills, AB70 and SB42, that aim to take public notices out of newspapers and put them instead on government websites.

It's a bad idea that would harm transparency, democracy and public trust.

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Without a third-party, independent source providing the information, there is no accountability, no checks and balances to make sure that government is posting all the public notices it is required by law to post.

Most Wisconsin residents continue to rely on the printed newspaper for information about their local elected governments, as they have for decades.

For those who choose not to use computers, it remains the best source.

For those who do use computers, there's already an invaluable resource at your fingertips. Since 2005, newspapers in Wisconsin have been digitally archiving every public notice published in every newspaper in our state every day. Today, a decade of this information is available free of charge on this website:

www.WisconsinPublicNotices.org.

Wisconsin newspapers collect and archive this information as a public service. The database is very user-friendly—searchable by city, county, newspaper, zip code and keyword. Businesses throughout the state use this website to learn about projects they may wish to bid on. Just ask a contractor how efficient it would be to have to log in daily to the website of every local government in Wisconsin.

The amount charged by newspapers for publishing public notices is regulated by the state Department of Administration. The rates charged barely cover the cost of processing and printing the information. It's a good deal for taxpayers.

State law prescribes even the typeface and font size of these notices to help the DOA cut down on its administrative workload. The newspapers agreed to this standardization, and the Wisconsin Legislature approved it without opposition in 2012.

And government is not the sole bearer of the cost of publishing legal notices. In many cases, the cost is passed along by the government agency to those seeking government action.

As Beth Bennett, executive director of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, has testified: "A notice for a new license is passed along to the new licensee. Foreclosure notices are assumed by the banks and the attorneys handling the foreclosure. Court notices are passed along by the courts to the subject of the legal matter; and in many instances, public notices are required to be placed by John Q. Citizen who pays directly for the publication of the notice."

Taking public notices out of newspapers is just another attempt by government officials to curb transparency in Wisconsin. It's a bad move, and the people of Wisconsin should push back against it.

— *"Your Right to Know" is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council(www.wisfoic.org), a group dedicated to open government.. Rusty Cunningham is executive editor of the La Crosse Tribune.*