

Watchdogging government is our job

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February 7, 2015

The Association of County Commissions of Georgia has urged the Georgia General Assembly to effectively remove paid public notices from newspapers and bury them on government websites in order to save a few bucks.

But what the commissioners aren't telling you and other citizens is that the proposal will have the reverse effect by adding to government cost for curating, posting and archiving the notices to meet the legal requirement that they be easily accessible to the public.

They also aren't mentioning that consigning public notices to government websites removes the protection of independent distribution of need-to-know information about taxes, foreclosures, rezoning, land taking, public works contracts, school budgets and other government intentions and actions.

The public has a right to know what government is up to and how it is spending your tax dollars. Allowing the government to be its own watchdog — which is the role of the press — is akin to the inmates overseeing the jailhouse.

There's a reason newspapers are the designated distributor of public notices: They reach across all demographic groups and aren't beholden to partisan interests. They also reach far more people in print and online than any other media — and especially government websites, which are difficult to navigate and seldom accessed by the public at large.

Yes, newspapers get paid for publishing public notices. But the revenue hardly covers the cost of processing and printing them. And keep in mind there are still citizens without Internet capabilities or reliable service — as well as a lot of folks who don't trust information on the Internet.

Cost isn't and shouldn't be the central issue. Government transparency is what's really at stake. Posting public notices to

government websites would obscure the public's right to know how government is affecting their everyday lives.

Removing public notices from newspapers is a misguided and bad idea, and we urge our local General Assembly delegation to say no to any endeavor to pass such a law.

Let's keep the public notices open to the sunshine, and not buried away in the deep abysses of government-controlled websites. Let's keep government as open as possible. That's the job our forebears assigned to newspapers.