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Proposed bill on legal ads squelches government transparency

By Augusta Chronicle Editorial Staff

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Local governments have long been required to post legal notices in a place they can be easily and widely seen by the general public – the local newspaper.

The beauty of the decades-old law is that *all* notices get advertised – including ones government officials would rather the public not know about.

But a misguided proposal gaining traction at the Georgia Capitol would let cities and counties get by with burying public notices on their websites only, where people are less likely to take notice.

The legislation, Senate Bill 186, would make it harder for inquisitive residents to find out about everything from election notices and public hearings to zoning changes and tax liens.

How many people do you know who get their information from a city or county government website? The number is surely dwarfed by the people you know who see the information in the newspaper.

As much as it pains people to admit in the year 2015, not every Georgian owns a computer or has Internet access. That's especially true in the state's more rural and low-income areas. Local newspapers, however, cover all of Georgia's 159 counties and can be picked up for pocket change.

Naturally, local governments want to get out of paying to advertise public notices, and newspapers don't want to lose the revenue. But it's a relatively small amount of money compared to the huge loss of public access to information. The bill's proponents say it would save the average local government only \$9,800 a year.

Any savings a government would realize would get eaten up by having to maintain the information as spelled out under S.B. 186. In addition to allowing online notices, the bill requires each city and county clerk or other designated person to maintain a book with each electronic notice for 12 months after publication. Someone also has to field information requests from citizens who wish to receive the notices via mail or e-mail.

Such tasks might not be so labor-intensive in tech-savvy areas of the state, but remember – many Georgia counties aren't tech-savvy; some don't even have websites.

We're not sure why some state lawmakers want to burden their local counterparts with additional work when the state's newspapers already offer governments in all 159 counties free online notice posting through the Georgia Press Association's Georgia Public Notice website at georgiapublicnotice.com. The site aggregates public notices from printed newspapers across the state at no additional cost to taxpayers. Online users may access this information for free.

Money's not the issue here – it's accountability.

Newspapers have played a historical role in helping the public keep an eye on government through its news reporting and publishing government notices. Newspapers also serve as a community's historical record, a source for present and future researchers and historians.

Allowing governments to opt out of newspaper legal advertising is trusting public officials to police themselves – something they generally have a poor record of doing. Some local officials recently interviewed by the *Rome News-Tribune* said if the law passed they likely would continue to print some notices, but not others.

Is that what we want? Government administrators determining which public notices get noticed and which ones get buried?

S.B. 186 doesn't make things easier on the public, but it does make it easier for the government to conceal its

actions and hide information under the guise of saving a few bucks.

Similar bills have been proposed in Georgia, and all have rightfully failed to make it out of the Capitol. The vote on S.B. 186 must occur no later than Crossover Day, this Friday, to have a chance of reaching the state House of Representatives and the governor's desk this year.

In the interest of transparency, Georgia lawmakers should give this flawed bill, and its eventual House companion, a "no" vote without further delay.

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