

Senate Bill 186 reduces governmental transparency

By John Hewitt

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On March 4, SB 186 passed by a three-two vote in committee. The proposed bill, if approved by both the Georgia Senate and House of Representatives, would allow any local government the option of no longer posting public notices in the office legal organ newspaper in their county.

The bill would give governmental entities the option of posting meeting notices, local legislation, tax increase notices, bidding opportunities and any number of other notifications that the public deserves easy access to on their individual websites.

The governmental entity would have the ability to manipulate notices with no accountability of third-party involvement. They could, if so desired, manipulate content, dates of dissemination at will with no oversight other than from within their own office.

Public confidence in accountability in government and elected officials, in general, has plummeted in recent years. Accusations of bid rigging, unethical and illegal procurement, improper meetings and ethics violations have become commonplace. Many such accusations are confirmed to be factual after extensive and costly investigation; and the public is left to deal with the consequences and incurred costs.

For elected state officials to give county and city entities carte blanche permission to operate under an even greater shield of protection from accountability is incomprehensible. The people of Georgia deserve better.

Newspapers are a vital cog in the wheel of governmental operations and accountability. We hold officials accountable and are the voice of the people. Newspapers are unbiased community assets that provide an irreplaceable network of checks and balances in government. Newspapers are permanent; they cannot be altered once they have been printed.

If SB 186 becomes law, it would far too easy for governmental entities to structure websites in a manner that could make it extremely difficult for the public to have access to information; there would be no oversight. It would require that the public have access to a computer and internet to be able to access public information.

One particularly disturbing part of SB 186 would allow governmental entities to maintain public notices for only 12 months; compared to the permanency of a

printed newspaper. If impropriety of any sort is suspected by a government official or employee, and an investigation is launched, it is likely that the discovery and confirmation of such impropriety would be after a 12-month period and evidence could already have disappeared. If there is an attempt by an official or employee of a government entity to eliminate evidence it could be done legally and permanently with the right technical ability. Contrary to what many believe, items appearing online are not permanent. All it takes to destroy an online evidence trail is to simply eliminate links or intentionally corrupt a file and thereby eliminating the ability to confirm the original posting date or content.

The cost of advertising in the official legal organ newspaper of each Georgia county is miniscule in comparison to the costs incurred by a government entity to have clerks responsible for posting and disseminating of public notices. The rate is set by the secretary of state and has not been increased since the mid-1990s. At only \$10 per 100 words (or one cent per word), newspapers are by far the most cost effective, permanent and accurate manner in which to inform the public and to maintain a permanent record of governmental action.

I am asking that all interested parties contact your elected officials at the state level and demand accountability in government by requesting that they vote against SB 186.

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