

Once again government is trying to fix a problem that doesn't exist.

Under the guise of saving taxpayer dollars, Senate Bill 186 proposes to allow local governments to place legal notices — that are now required to be published in a legal organ newspaper — on the governments' websites instead. In a Senate State and Local Government Operations Committee hearing last week, sponsor Sen. Bill Heath stated that governments could save an average of \$900 a year by placing public notices on their own websites.

However, other provisions of the bill undermine supporters' claims that the legislation would provide any meaningful savings for governments. The bill would require governments that switch to web publishing to also publish instructions for accessing the online notices in a newspaper each month for a year and then annually afterwards; maintain the notices for 12 months; keep a separate notice book that is indexed and updated for public inspection; provide a copy of each e-notice to the public library and clerk of Superior Court to be maintained for a year; and mail or email a copy of each notice to any citizen who requests it.

More important than any added expense or cumbersome requirements, however, are the very real threats to access and accountability when we ask government to "self-regulate," if such a thing is really possible.

There are historically valid reasons that public notices — everything from information about taxes, budgets, foreclosures, rezonings, land takings, contracts and more — are required to be published by newspapers. Newspapers are widely accessible by the majority of people in this state, the cost of access is low, and the printed product provides a permanent record that cannot be manipulated. Moreover, newspapers are an independent third party with a deeply-rooted responsibility to provide government oversight.

Sponsors of this bill are overlooking the reality that there remain many Georgians who don't own a computer, who are not computer savvy, or who don't want or don't have access to the Internet. Moreover, in counties where there are multiple government jurisdictions, citizens could find

themselves searching from one website to another in order to find the information they need. Local newspapers provide a clearing house for public notices, a one-stop-shop that is user-friendly and fills the digital gaps for many residents of our communities.

More significantly, sponsors of this bill are overlooking this key fact — public notices are already online in every county in this state — a free service provided courtesy of newspapers at www.GeorgiaPublicNotice.com. This calls into question what sponsors of this bill are really hoping to accomplish — make access easier for the public or make it easier for governments to operate under the radar.

SB 186 was passed out of the State and Local Government Operations Committee last week and is now in the Senate Rules Committee. If lawmakers are really looking to help Georgia's citizens, that's as far as it will go.