

OUR VIEW: Public notices belong in newspapers

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- **0 comments**
- As we prepare to recognize Sunshine Week, the public's right to know is under assault in the Georgia General Assembly.
- Senate Bill 186, which would make it more difficult for citizens to access public notices, passed out of the State and Local Government Operations Committee by a 3-2 vote last week. It now moves to the powerful Senate Rules Committee, which will decide if the legislation is voted on by the full Senate.
- Public notices have traditionally been printed where communities are most likely to find important information they want and need to know — in the local newspaper.
- If SB 186 becomes law, it would make it possible for local governments to post public notices electronically on their official websites, removing the requirement to publish those notices in the county's legal organ newspaper.
- This effort to allow local governments the option of placing required public notices on government websites is poor, ill-advised legislation that should be viewed as a threat to and further erosion of government transparency.
- The reason public notices are required for publication in newspapers is to make them available to as wide an audience as possible. It's important to remember there remains a sizable number of taxpayers who are not plugged in to the Internet, largely by their own choosing. Newspapers are easily available regardless of a citizen's access to the Internet or income level.
- Keeping public notices public is critical.
- Public notices alert the general public about bankruptcy proceedings, adoptions, foreclosures, public hearings, tax liens, local legislative proposals, zoning changes and proposed tax increases — all things the public wants and needs to know.
- Burying that information on a government website would be an assault on taxpayers, and all residents. Government websites are traditionally difficult to navigate and rarely accessed by the public at large.
- And the savings for local governments from eliminating the requirement to publish public notices in the newspaper is limited and comes at the expense of eliminating access for some taxpayers.
- Public notices should not be hidden in a dark corner. They should be kept out in the sunshine where they can be easily seen.
- Government cannot be its own watchdog.
- Newspapers have a long, important legacy of helping the public keep an eye on local government through news reporting and the publication of government notices.
- Newspapers also serve as a historical record that will be looked upon by researchers now and years in the future. Much of that record is documented by public notices.
- Simply placing required public notices on government owned or controlled websites would mean a person would have to know exactly what they're searching for — or what keywords to use — in order to find the specific information they want to access.
- The government website model effectively hides the actions of government.
- Government should not take any step that makes the work of government less accessible to their bosses — the taxpayers.
- Urge your state senators and representatives to stand for government transparency by opposing SB 186.