

Morning News, Savannah, Georgia, on proposal to publish legal notices on government-controlled websites:

It's a familiar ploy: A group of Georgia lawmakers introduces a bill that they claim will benefit citizens. Then, upon closer inspection, the reality seems to be the opposite.

This time, the issue is legal notices that local governments must publish in local newspapers designated as legal organs.

Six Republican senators, mostly from metro Atlanta, are pushing legislation that would let any local government entity publish required notices, advertisements and other items of public business on government-controlled websites. Print publication by independent entities would vanish.

It's a bad idea. Senators should send SB 186 to the shredder.

In the interest of full disclosure, this newspaper generates revenue from publishing legal ads for governments in Chatham County. We'd hate to see it go away. But there are compelling reasons to maintain the current, long-standing practice, which has kept Georgians informed and governments honest.

First, this proposal imposes new duties on governments that opt for e-notification. This includes creating a website, an index, a repository for paper copies (and an index for that repository) and providing ongoing service of ads by mail or email to anyone who wants to be copied. How much will all this cost taxpayers? No one seems to know. But building a secure website could be expensive. A site that could be hacked would not be sufficient, as electronic documents can be doctored too easily.

And will such changes help citizens become more informed? It seems doubtful. Under current law, when a government agency or official advertises in the legal organ newspaper, the newspaper itself is a permanent record of what was published and when. The newspaper provides copies to the Clerk of Superior Court to be preserved for not less than 50 years. That record cannot be manipulated electronically. The process is easy as well.

Here's a reality check for metro-Atlanta lawmakers: Many Georgians don't have computers or Internet access. Not everyone is lucky enough to be able to surf the net. By comparison, newspapers are inexpensive.

Of course, the more ways the public can access government information, the better. So here's one thing that lawmakers who are pushing SB 186 should know: Citizens who want online access to legal notices can find it right now on GeorgiaPublicNotice.com.

Here's one more thing they should know: That site is free.

--