

# Senate bill would let politicians do public notice ‘on their own’

Would you trust politicians to tell you what they’re doing and when they’re doing it if you leave it up to them?

If you do, there’s some oceanfront property in Smarr that we’d like to sell you.

But a small group of Georgia state senators want to do just that, give local officials the ability to set their own terms for public notice, with Senate Bill 186. It would end the requirement that local governments use their local newspaper to comply with public notice requirements. It is sponsored by metro Atlanta area lawmakers. This proposal would allow local governments to post legal notices online rather than in the county’s legal organ.

The Reporter is the legal organ for Monroe County. Yes, local governments pay to have their legal notices published -- and it’s natural that newspapers don’t want to lose that revenue. But look at the facts: The city of Forsyth, Monroe County commission and board of education have a combined annual budget of more than \$70 million. Of that amount, total spending on public notice advertisements amounts to about \$10,000 per year. That’s peanuts. Our governments would spend a lot more than that trying to update websites and comply with all the new unfunded mandates in this bill. The bill would require all kinds of new recording procedures for on-line postings including the creation of a paper record. In other words, local governments would post important public notices on a website nobody sees and then record it on paperwork nobody will know about.

It makes more sense to do what we’re doing now: Print public notices on paper that many people see (the local newspaper), and let the newspapers post it on-line free of charge for sharing anywhere and with everyone. Yes, the way Georgia does public notices works. It’s inexpensive. It reaches a broad audience. And it accomplishes the intended objective of letting the public know about a government action before it affects the people.

For instance, the Monroe County school board notified this newspaper last year, as required by current law, that it intended to condemn 12 acres next to its board of education. The resulting news

coverage prompted the community to rally against the idea and the school board reversed course. The Reporter won a state-wide public notice journalism award for its effort. The public outcry never would've happened if the school board had been allowed, as this bill would, to post public notices somewhere in the ethereal world wide net.

But let's pretend we did trust local governments to post public notices on their websites. How would that work? Well we can look at the Monroe County government's website and find that the last budget they posted on it was from 2013, two years ago. The last meeting agenda posted there was from January. They've had at least four meetings since then.

Or look at small cities like Culloden. Its website still leads off promoting the Culloden Highland Games, which haven't been held in about 10 years.

As the Macon Telegraph noted, this is a legislative solution to a problem that does not exist. Legal notices are already compiled and posted on the Georgia Press Association's Website --

[GeorgiaPublicNotice.com](http://GeorgiaPublicNotice.com) -- free of charge.

The current system works. It keeps our local governments accountable. Perhaps that's why the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) tries this gambit almost every year. Maybe they just don't like "those lying newspapers" reporting their actions and taking note. We take that as a badge of honor. And we hope the people of Georgia realize it's in their interest to keep public notices in the hands of someone other than the politicians.

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