Opinion

Keeping notices in print is important for public right to know

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HARRISBURG — "An idea whose time may not have come."

In more than three hours of testimony — and no breaks — those words from AARP representative Ray Landis hit closest to the truth in the House committee hearing Thursday on House Bill 633, which would lift the requirement on local governments and school boards to advertise legal notices in newspapers.

During the session, the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association lobbied for a rejection of the bill on the premise it denies the public's right to know and will have a devastating financial effect on newspapers in Pennsylvania.

On the other side are the associations of township, borough and county governments and school boards arguing that the publication requirement is a costly unnecessary mandate in a world going digital. The associations argued the public would be best served by putting notices on county, municipal and school district websites "for free."

Some of the most conflicting testimony and rebuttal came on the subject of how much governments will save if the paid advertisement requirement is lifted and how much they will spend to fit the legal requirements for website publishing without violating fair bidding practices and open meetings laws.

Newspaper publishers Martin Till and Bernard Oravec, of the Easton Express-Times and Williamsport Sun-Gazette, respectively, offered eloquent analyses of the loss of revenue to family-owned Pennsylvania newspaper companies as well as denying public notices access to a large segment of the population.

"The system is not broken," Till said more than once during Thursday's hearing, which was attended by more than 60 editors and publishers.

Till's point was that public notices are not only printed in newspapers at the lowest advertising rate available but are also provided in a searchable database online, mypublicnotices.com.

Those who read newspapers can learn what their local governments are doing and those who want to search the web can find the same information there.

If notices are only on government websites, the segment of the population without computers — estimated to be more than half of all Pennsylvanians over 65 — would not be privy to the date of an upcoming zoning hearing for a trash-transfer plant in their neighborhood or the public notice of a potential pollutant being discharged into a nearby stream or a meeting to hear testimony on why their school district should raise taxes instead of cutting the music program.

The lobbyists who represent the local government agencies argued that the world is going digital, newspapers are dying, and...
this bill is in keeping with the times.

The AARP's Landis, who capped off the list of 12 presenters, made the point that both sides are right, but the "time may not have come" yet.

We are a world going digital at breakneck speed, but not everyone is there yet.

The irony was not lost that in a roomful of people arguing for the value of print newspapers, many were live-tweeting the testimony from iPads.

And, while insisting that online is where people get their information, state Association of Township Supervisors spokesman Elam Herr "confessed" he reads a newspaper every day and isn't on Facebook.

Landis pointed out that national statistics regarding the daily use of computers may tell a different story than Pennsylvania figures. Pennsylvania has one of the largest populations of senior citizens in the nation, second only to Florida, and it also has one of the largest populations of lower-income seniors.

This is the segment of the population that relies on newspapers for its information. These citizens, who are homeowners, taxpayers, voters, are the ones who would not see public notices if notices are not required by law to remain in print newspapers.

Putting public notices exclusively on websites will leave a large segment of the population without access to important public information, particularly in this commonwealth.

Another irony in Thursday's hearing was that by sheer coincidence I was sitting in the hearing room with the editor who first hired me into this business, Bob Urban, now editor of the Lehighton Times-News.

Bob hired me in the age of typewriters, and now I'm checking e-mail on an iPhone. How times have changed.

Changing still — and changing quickly — is where we find ourselves in the media industry. We are not abandoning our loyal print readers, even as we embrace the digital pull of information.

Part of not abandoning those who rely on print is fighting to preserve paid public notices as insurance that citizens know what their government agencies are planning without needing Internet access to find out.

Putting legal notices only on the web may sound to some like a good idea, but it's "an idea whose time may not have come."

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