

## **Editorial | Newspapers, news sites best places for public to access notices**

Chip Minemyer

---

We join the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association and our colleagues across the state in strongly opposing Senate Bill 194, which would give local governments the option of advertising public notices on county or municipal government websites.

Rather, recognizing that changes have occurred in both government and the news industry, we support House Bill 1291, which allows for modernization of the process without limiting the public's access to this critical information.

Public notices keep residents informed about planned government action – zoning changes, fee hikes, tax increases, new ordinances, shifts in polling places and much more.

PNA's Board of Directors supports HB 1291, legislation led by state Rep. Robert Freeman (D-Northampton), chairman of the House Local Government Committee – which is where the bill now sits.

Freeman's bill would expand places where public notices could appear to include digital media sites and with organizations that have no print component. The bill prioritizes newspapers and their websites – where more people are still most likely to see notices – but recognizes the growing impact of other forms of news media.

For example, a community that no longer has a printed newspaper but has a continuing digital descendant would find notices there – or through an online-only news organization. Each of those options would maintain the independence of the process.

SB 194, on the other hand, would allow local governments to publish public notices on their own platforms – limiting access and transparency. The Senate bill was voted out of committee last week.

We urge our readers to contact their state senators and voice opposition to SB 194.

PNA argued that removing public notices from newspapers is “bad news for government transparency, accountability and, ultimately, taxpayer protection, which relies on access to

trusted information about government activity before official action is taken.”

The media organization cited these concerns:

- Traffic to government websites is much lower than to news sites.
- Government websites are often difficult to navigate.
- Government website content is often not updated.

There are also concerns about areas of the state with limited or no internet service.

“Government websites are not and never will be independent, third-party providers of public notice information with which newspapers have long been trusted,” the PNA said, adding: “Government website advertising ignores taxpayers who do not have access to reliable broadband.

Governments that choose to advertise on their own websites risk ignoring constituents who do not have access to reliable internet service.”

Media companies do charge fees for publishing public notices. PNA said the cost to municipalities and counties would be higher if those entities had to hire staff to handle the posting of notices on their own.

Newspapers across Pennsylvania have made public notices available online without a fee to read – even on websites that have paywalls for accessing content.

In addition, the PNA hosts a site – [www.publicnoticepa.com](http://www.publicnoticepa.com) – where notices from across the state are aggregated for free reading. This newspaper is a participant in that program.

Public notices should be just that – public – posted not on a government-controlled platform but in a local news outlet available to everyone.

That starts with newspapers and their websites.