

# What's government doing?

## Read public notices in newspapers and find out

*Scranton journalist explains their importance, and why he relies on them as a reporting tool*

*Editor's note: This article in observance of National Newspaper Week, Oct. 3-9, is from the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association, the official trade organization representing more than 350 print, digital and news media-related members across the commonwealth.*

"Forty million in county bonds."

"Notices of school borrowing – \$5, \$6 and \$14 million."

"Hearing on declaring a missing person dead. Person presumably has been murdered."

"Applications for pardons. Potential data breaches. Amending the state Constitution. An election proclamation of candidates and polling places. ... Ordinance regulating feral cats."

In an award acceptance video, veteran journalist Jim Lockwood ticks off these and the other kinds of public notice topics he "scours" every morning in his Scranton newspaper. The listing of government agency and legal proceedings provides the seeds for expanded news stories, many of which turn up on The Times-Tribune front page and have earned Lockwood the Public Notice Journalism Award from the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association and the PNA Foundation every year since the first honor was given in 2014.

Still, the biggest winner isn't Lockwood. It is the readers who learn through these public notices, and Lockwood's reporting, about pending government actions that will affect their pocketbooks and their quality of life. Public notices are wide-ranging in subject matter, but have one thing in common, he said: "the public's right to know."

"Since the first U.S. Congress, public officials have understood that newspapers are the best medium to notify the public about official matters because they contain the essential elements of public notice: accessibility, independence, verifiability and archivability," according to the Carson City, Nevada-based Public Notice Resource Center. Open meetings, freedom-of-information laws and public notice are essential for government transparency.

To that end, Pennsylvania newspapers not only publish public notices in print and on their websites in front of paywalls, but they also upload them daily onto a statewide, searchable database at [www.publicnoticepa.com](http://www.publicnoticepa.com). The site is maintained by PNA at no additional cost to taxpayers or government.

Lockwood became interested in public notices years ago while he was working as a reporter in New Jersey. Questions about municipal and school district budgets, he quickly realized, were often answered in the public notices on the pages of his own newspaper. He was hooked, regularly reading the small-type announcements in the paper's classified section, clipping the notices and making sure they were shared with colleagues.

How does he use them in reporting? Lockwood follows up on public notices that are vaguely written. Other times he sees an opportunity to explain an issue or help make sense of an announcement that is heavy on legalese, and light on clarity. Lockwood hopes that referencing public notices in his reporting, whether they are an entry into a topic or part of ongoing coverage, "illuminates and reinforces the vital role that public notices play in government requirements, transparency and accountability."

Lockwood worked at The Times-Tribune when he was first recognized for public notice reporting by PNA, its award mirrored at about the same time by honors from the national Public Notice Resource Center, which lauded the Scranton staff writer for a "series of stories that deftly incorporated public notice information into his coverage of local government."

One article dissected the role public notices played in alerting the Scranton community, and its nonresident workers, of a pending commuter tax. "Another story drew citizens' attention to a possible 12-story cell tower to be placed in a local park. The Federal Communications Commission was receiving comments on the tower, but the owner of the tower would not confirm that it was looking at the location," PNR board President Bradley L. Thompson II, who is also president and CEO of Detroit Legal News Co., said at the time of Lockwood's recognition.

“In these stories and several others, he scoured the public notices and drew the public’s attention to them.”

Lockwood’s recent public notice coverage included the status of a contaminated lot being cleaned up and turned into a pocket park; a behind-the-scenes tutorial on the annual delinquent property tax sale; and reporting on a plan to triple a local services tax. He started to dig for information when he saw a zoning board agenda item in a public notice that included an application to convert an office building into 160 apartments and construct a 10-story structure behind it. The office building turned out to be a downtown Scranton icon, Lockwood writing a detailed report on both developer and plans before the zoning hearing.

Lockwood compares public notices to the town crier of the nation’s earliest days, the one who alerted citizens to what was happening in the community. Public notices continue to lay a foundation for civic life and civil discourse that fosters public participation, he said.

“They should not be underestimated or overlooked.”

*For today’s public notice listings, please turn to Page(s) --.*