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Leave the light on: Effort to hide public notices wouldn't serve taxpayers

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Legal notices, those columns of small type that have long appeared in newspapers across our nation, have a serious purpose: informing the general public of how elected officials are spending — or planning to spend — their tax dollars.

They are published in newspapers because the medium offers the most effective, most reliable method of bringing important information to taxpayers and because newspapers provide a permanent, legal record that may be reviewed at any time.

Though the system has worked well for decades, a state representative has introduced a bill we think would work mainly to keep taxpayers in the dark by allowing such notices to be published on governmental websites rather than in official newspapers and their websites.

House Bill 507, sponsored by State Rep. Angie Chen Button, a Richardson Republican, would allow cities, counties and school districts in Texas to publish competitive bidding notices on their own websites. Button says the bill is designed to save cities, counties and school districts money by eliminating the cost of buying space in newspapers. But we worry it would make taxpayers poorer by taking away a well-established source of knowledge about open government.

If legal notices were published only on governmental websites it is doubtful the public would be made aware of the expenditures of their tax dollars to the extent they are with newspapers disseminating that information.

The newspaper industry is heavily invested in the Internet and virtually every notice that appears in a Texas newspaper is also on the paper's website at no extra cost. In addition, the Texas Daily Newspaper Association and the Texas Press Association have collaborated to establish a website, texaslegalnotices.com, that provides a searchable database for public notices that appear in all Texas newspapers. So anyone who wants to find a public notice online already can do so, while those who are more comfortable with a printed version still have that option. Would the state invest to match that system? Or will we lose such access now provided by the newspaper industry?

Newspaper public notices, both in print and online, provide a third-party system to verify that information about governments' activities is reaching as many taxpayers as possible. Publishers are required to provide an affidavit that the information was published for the required time period, which would not happen with a government Internet site.

To do the same job newspapers already do, governments would have to spend thousands of dollars for secure servers, programming, posting and auditing.

Beyond that, the public knows the newspaper is its source for legal notices and other information about their governments. Moving them to a government or government-contracted site would inevitably result in the public knowing less about what governments are doing. Notices could easily be hidden on these websites. And rather than having a single stop for notices, interested readers would have to wade through multiple sites to find information now available in one place.

Last month, the News-Journal website had more than 1.6 million page views by more than 200,000 unique visitors. We doubt there is a government website in Gregg County that could match that. That access is on top of the 24,000 or so printed copies the News-Journal distributes daily across East Texas.

We know from experience that many — not all, but many — governments routinely do their best to hide information the law says must be public. At the News-Journal, journalists routinely tussle with public bodies that fail to post notice of public meetings in the timely fashion required by state law. We tangle over release of documents state law has deemed to be public information. And we have no evidence to make us believe that putting the fox in charge of the public notice henhouse would be any different.

We have to wonder what Button's real goal is, especially when we consider she also is the author of House Bill 679, which aims to grant non-elected government officials broader authority to spend tax dollars without the oversight of elected officials or the public.

Button and other legislators should concern themselves with peeling away the multiple layers of government in place and stop trying to keep public information in the shadows by keeping it off the agendas of public meetings and off the pages of local newspapers across the state of Texas.

