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Public Notice  
Resource Center

# Public Notice: An American Tradition

*An Examination of the Role of  
Newspapers in Public Notice*

Presented by

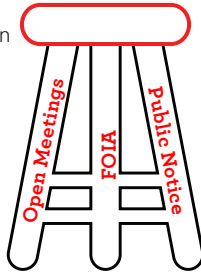


**Nebraska Press Association**

# Why Public Notice Should Remain in Newspapers

Along with open meeting and freedom of information laws, public notice is an essential element of the

**three-legged stool of government transparency**



**Newspapers** remain the primary vehicle for public notice in **all 50 states**



This is not about “newspapers vs the internet”.

**It’s newspapers and newspaper websites vs government websites**

and newspaper websites have a much larger audience. Moving notice from newspapers to government websites would **reduce the presence of public notices on the internet**

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**

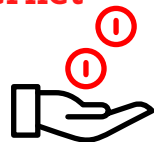


**Verifiability**



**Archivability**

**Publishing notices on the internet is neither cheap nor free**





**Newsprint is inherently superior to the internet for public notice**  
because reading a newspaper is a serendipitous process.

We find things in newspapers we weren't expecting to see. On the internet, we search for specific information and ignore everything else.



**Citizens continue to learn about vital civic matters from newspaper notices.**

Documented examples of people taking action and alerting their community after reading a newspaper notice are reported on a regular basis. (See page 10)

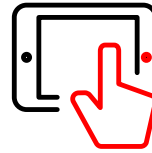
**Verifying publication is difficult-to-impossible on the web.**

That's why the courts subject digital evidence to far greater scrutiny than evidence published in newspapers



**Significant numbers of people in rural areas still lack high-speed internet access.**

Those who are older than 65 or who have lower incomes or lack high-school diplomas are also cut off from the internet in far higher numbers than the average.



**Moreover, the real digital divide for public notice is growing**

due to the massive migration to smartphones and other small-screen digital devices



Requiring independent, third-party newspapers to ensure that public notices run in accordance with the law helps

**prevent government officials from hiding information**

they would prefer the public not to see

**Governments aren't very good at publishing information on the internet.** Unlike newspaper publishers,

**public officials aren't compelled by the free market to operate effective websites.**



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## **About PNRC**

The Public Notice Resource Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides research and education in support of effective public notice.

# Introduction

Most of us take public notices<sup>1</sup> for granted. Which is understandable. After all, they've been running in newspapers for hundreds of years. So we tend to forget about them.

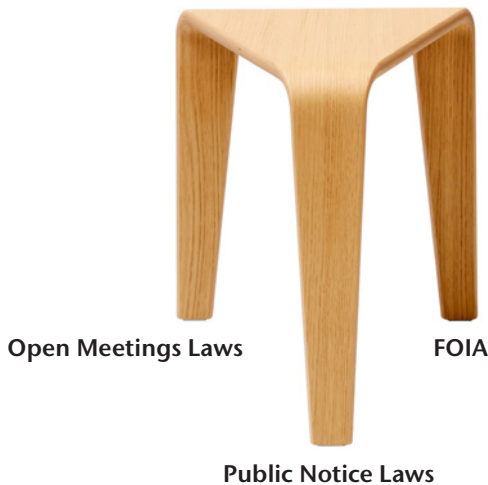
But when you really think about it they're kind of amazing. Federal and state governments actually passed laws requiring themselves—and politically powerful private interests—to disclose information about their plans and activities.

They represent the best of self-government. Along with open-meeting and freedom of information laws, they're an important part of the three-legged stool of government transparency. They ensure citizens have access to information they need to participate in the governance of their communities. They're an essential element of our fragile democracy.

Unfortunately, proposals that would drastically revise our public notice laws put their vital role in our democracy at risk.

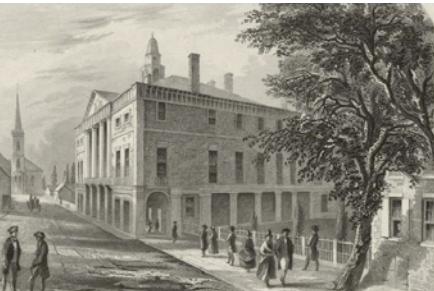
This pamphlet will explore the origins, purpose and defining characteristics of public notice in the U.S., and will address the present threat and how we can avert it.

## Three-legged stool of government transparency



# Origins And Purpose Of Public Notice

The concept of public notice was conceived long before the emergence of newspapers, when early civilizations posted notices in public squares. This crude method was eventually refined with the publication of the first English language newspaper in 1665—a court newspaper called the *Oxford Gazette*. After it was renamed *The London Gazette*, the paper began carrying notices from the King’s Court and from public officials in London and outlying regions<sup>2</sup>.



Federal Hall in New York City, site of the first two sessions of the U.S. Congress

Like many aspects of our legal system, public notice in America is modeled after the British system. State governments turned to newspapers to publish notices throughout colonial times<sup>3</sup>; in 1789, the newly created federal government followed suit. The Acts of the First Session of the First U.S. Congress required the Secretary of State to publish all “bills, orders, resolutions and congressional votes” in at least three publicly available newspapers<sup>4</sup>.

Democratic self-rule is based on the premise that information about the government must be accessible in order for the electorate to make well-informed decisions<sup>5</sup>. Public notice laws in the U.S. recognize that newspapers are the best means to provide that access. But not *all* newspapers. State statutes establish specific criteria for newspapers to qualify to carry notices—criteria designed to assure they could deliver meaningful accessibility, including paid circulation, a minimum percentage of news content and a local publishing address. Many public notice laws also require them to publish continuously for a minimum period of time to qualify as “official newspapers,” ensuring stability in the venue for notices so citizens know where to find them<sup>6</sup>.

Public notice laws are also based on the right to due process of law guaranteed by the federal and state constitutions. Due process protects Americans’ fundamental rights from arbitrary or wrongful violation and affords citizens with an opportunity to be heard before the state restricts those rights. Public notice plays a vital role in extending those protections by providing a window into government activity and notifying citizens so they can exercise their constitutional right to be heard. Importantly, notification not only informs the individual or entity most directly affected, but also the general public, which has an interest in knowing how public power is wielded.

# Essential Elements Of A Public Notice

Federal and state public notice statutes generally establish four fundamental criteria for a public notice.

Each of these elements are critical aspects of the checks and balances that public notice was designed to foster.



## 1. Accessible

Every citizen in the jurisdiction affected by the notice must have a realistic opportunity to read it



## 2. Archivable

Notices must be capable of being archived in a secure and publicly available format for the use of the judicial system, researchers and historians



## 3. Independent

Notices must be published by organizations independent of the government body or corporation whose plans or actions are the subject of the notice



## 4. Verifiable

There must be a way to verify that each notice was actually published in accordance with the law

# Types Of Public Notice

Generally speaking, there are three different types of public notice.

**Citizen participation notices** are issued by legislatures, administrative agencies and other public bodies, and inform the public about the plans and operations of the government in their community.

**Commercial notices** provide citizens with information about vital business activity and the disposition of private property.

**Court notices** are processed by officers of the court or non-governmental organizations to announce the outcome of civil legal proceedings that affect the community. The most common example are foreclosure notices, which may be authorized by court rulings or, in “non-judicial” states, by trustees or others exercising a power of sale stipulated in a deed of trust.



## Citizen Participation Notices



Government Meetings and Hearings



Meeting Minutes or Summaries



Agency Proposals



Legislation and Resolutions



Financial Reports



Proposed Budgets and Tax Rates



Land and Water Use



Property Tax Assessments



State Employee Salaries



Creation of Special Tax Districts



Election Dates and Polling Places



School District Reports



Zoning, Annexation and Land Use Changes



Capital Improvement Plans





## Commercial Notices



Formation and Dissolution of Corporations



Unclaimed Property, Banks or Governments



Debtor Property Auctions (e.g., Self-Storage)



Delinquent Tax Lists, Tax Deed Sales



Government Construction, Service Contract Bids



Government Property Sales



Special Government Funds



Permit and License Applications



Condemnation Orders (i.e., Eminent Domain)



Criminal Property Forfeitures



## Court Notices



Mortgage Foreclosures



Name Changes



Probate Rulings



Divorces



Adoptions



Orders to Appear in Court

# Why Public Notice Should Remain In Newspapers

Public notices have been running in local newspapers for well over 100 years and they remain the primary means to disseminate notice in all 50 states. But longevity and tradition don't preclude the need for change. So it is only natural that with the advent of the internet, policymakers have started asking whether newspapers are still the best venue for public notice.

Many who haven't considered the issue deeply assume that newspapers have out-served their usefulness as the primary source of public notice. The tendency to make this assumption is especially prevalent among elite quarters of society. College-educated professionals who work in large metro areas and spend much of their day on desktop computers, tablets and smartphones often shortcut consideration of important issues and conclude that public notice should be moved exclusively to the web.

Scratch the surface of those flimsy assumptions, however, and it becomes clear that local newspapers are still the best distribution system for public notice. In the remainder of this pamphlet, we will explain why.

## It's not about newspapers versus the internet

Most newspapers supplement their print notices by publishing them on their own websites. Many others post notices on statewide public notice websites operated by their state press associations<sup>7</sup>. In fact, laws have been passed in 13 states specifically requiring newspapers to supplement the print versions of their notices by posting them on their own sites or their state press associations' aggregated site, or both<sup>8</sup>. There are also two national websites that index newspaper notices by state and allow for site-wide searches<sup>9</sup>.

So the proper framework within which to consider this issue doesn't pit newspapers versus the internet. The only relevant question is whether public notices should be published in newspapers *and* on their websites, or exclusively on government websites. The answer is clear

Newspapers already post notices on their websites free of charge; laws in 13 states require them to do so

if not self-evident. The print and electronic versions of newspapers draw far larger audiences than government websites. That is true both collectively on a national level, and locally in comparisons between specific newspapers and the government bodies within their distribution areas.

At the national level, more than 169 million people in the U.S. recently reported reading a newspaper at least once a month in print, on a website or via mobile app<sup>10</sup>. That's roughly 69 percent of the U.S. adult population. By contrast, only about one-third of U.S. adults reported using the web or an app to access state government websites over a much-lengthier twelve-month period<sup>11</sup>.

It is even more illuminating to completely discount the print versions of local newspapers and focus solely on their websites. The traffic to those sites invariably dwarfs the size of the audience that visits websites associated with the city and county governments they cover. Space doesn't permit an exhaustive comparison, but contrasting the audience ranks of a random selection of websites operated by newspapers and governments located in varying urban, suburban and rural locales [in state] across the U.S. provides a useful demonstration.

## Moving notices to government websites would significantly *reduce* the presence of public notice on the internet

As the chart on the inside back cover makes clear, eliminating newspaper notice and moving it to government websites would significantly *reduce* the presence of public notices on the internet.

Of course, there's no reason to discount the print versions of local newspapers. Although the public conversation about newspapers tends to focus on the shift to digital, over 80 percent of their readers continue to read a print version of the paper<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, local newspaper readership in small communities is commonly recognized to be stronger than in metro areas<sup>13</sup>.

Newspaper readers are also more civically engaged than average Americans, so they're more likely to pass on to others the information they read in notices. Individuals who always vote in local elections are 27 percent more likely to read a daily newspaper than a typical adult<sup>14</sup>. Seven in 10 of those regular voters read newspaper

media in print, online or on mobile devices in a typical week, and nearly eight in 10 contribute money to political organizations<sup>15</sup>.

Policymakers have long understood this dynamic. It's one of the reasons they've passed laws limiting the publications that qualify to run public notices to those that report local or general news<sup>16</sup>.

It's hardly surprising that far more people read the print and electronic versions of newspapers than visit government websites. Newspapers' business model demands readers; without enough of them their very existence is threatened. So they're published on a daily or weekly basis, and most newspaper websites are updated continuously. They include a wide range of news and information produced

by professional reporters and writers, which is carefully edited for accuracy and readability. They're designed to direct attention and capture eyeballs. And they're marketed to enhance their presence in a competitive marketplace.

By contrast, operating a website is merely incidental to the primary purposes of government. Many government units don't even have a website and others have bad ones but pay no price for their mediocrity as publishers. So their websites are designed for only occasional use. They are primarily utilized for transactional business, like permit applications, licenses, and tax payments, and for seeking information about government operations and facilities<sup>17</sup>.

Could it be any clearer that eliminating notice published in newspapers and on their websites would significantly diminish citizen input and participation in our democracy?

### **Newsprint is inherently superior to the internet for disseminating public notice**

Although web publication of notices should be encouraged—more notice is always better notice—intrinsic differences between the print and online experiences make newsprint a superior medium to the internet as a source of public notice.



Reading a newspaper, people discover things they didn't expect to see

When we read a newspaper, the tactile, contemplative experience and the size of its pages encourage us to find information we didn't expect to see<sup>18</sup>. That serendipitous process guarantees that public notices in local newspapers will be seen by many people in the community who didn't pick up the paper intending to read them<sup>19</sup>.

We behave differently on the internet. We tend to be goal-oriented, visiting websites for a particular reason. Although digital interfaces at their best encourage serendipity, it tends to be unidirectional<sup>20</sup> and is often focused on the sensational<sup>21</sup>. Public notices don't stand a chance in that environment; they get lost and are easily hidden. Moreover, the massive migration from desktop computers to small-screen mobile devices has exacerbated the problem.



People search for specific information on the internet and tend to ignore what they aren't looking for

Two recent examples highlight the danger of publishing notice only on government websites.

### ***Nestle Waters North America controversy in Michigan***

*Over the past decade, the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) and its state affiliates have moved some of their public notices from newspapers to the internet. As a result of those changes, in September 2016, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (“MDEQ”) was allowed to post exclusive notice on its website of its draft approval of a proposal to allow Nestle Waters to significantly increase the volume of groundwater it extracts for its Ice Mountain bottling plant in the state.*

*The notice had been published on the website for 41 days before a reporter from the Grand Rapids Press discovered it and wrote a story about the proposal<sup>22</sup>. For those 41 days of exclusive government-*



Nobody knew about Nestle's proposal to pump more groundwater because the only notice was posted on a government website

*website notice, the proposal attracted no public attention or comment—not even from an environmental organization that had previously fought Nestle in court to limit the amount of groundwater the company can withdraw from Michigan wells. Within the first three days after the newspaper story was published the agency received 3,000 comments. The flood of citizen input forced MDEQ to extend the comment period on three separate occasions and schedule a public hearing. The proposal eventually received 80,945 public comments<sup>23</sup> and the agency’s director admitted the notice posted on its website was insufficient<sup>24</sup>.*



Citizens in Arkansas exploded when they learned a government agency approved a hog farm near their homes

### **Buffalo National River hog farm in Arkansas**

*In August 2012, the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality (“ADEQ”) approved a general permit to allow Cargill and a group of local farmers to build a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation in rural Newton County on the banks of the Buffalo National River<sup>25</sup>. New public notice rules approved by EPA allowed ADEQ to provide exclusive notice of the permit filing on its website. Although it was posted for 30 days on the ADEQ site, the agency didn’t receive any comments, but the lack of response wasn’t the result of local apathy<sup>26</sup>. We know that because citizens in Newton County exploded when they discovered later that year that a hog farm was being built near their homes<sup>27</sup>.*

*Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent defending and settling lawsuits filed over the hog farm<sup>28</sup>. The experience turned many local citizens into activists intent on protecting the environment<sup>29</sup>. If ADEQ had spent a few hundred dollars publishing notices in a local newspaper, people living near the farm would have had an opportunity to weigh in on the proposal and much of the conflict may have been avoided.*

*In an ironic twist, when the hog farmers’ application to continue*

operating their CAFO was denied earlier this year, they filed a lawsuit arguing the order was invalid, in part, because ADEQ failed to publish a newspaper notice about its proposal to deny the permit.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, examples of the continuing power of newspaper notice to inform the public are legion. Here are several we discovered in the month immediately preceding the publication of this pamphlet:

- In Randolph County, Ga., a proposal to close seven of the county's nine polling places was discovered by an activist reading the notices in *The Southern Tribune*, a 1,200-circulation weekly based in the county seat of Cuthbert<sup>31</sup>.
- Wapallo County, Iowa, saved "tens of thousands" of dollars per year after a notice in the 6,800-circulation daily *Ottumwa Courier* allowed a local pharmacist to determine that CVS Caremark was massively overcharging the county for medication it was selling to the local jail system<sup>32</sup>.
- Ford County, Ill., saved significant money on a generator for its local jail after receiving several bids solicited via a notice it published in the 2,200-circulation weekly *Ford Country Reporter*. The generator was also larger than the one



Pharmacist Mark Frahm helped Wapallo Co., Iowa save tens of thousands of dollars annually due to information he read in a newspaper notice

initially rejected by the county commission after it had been noticed exclusively on the county website<sup>33</sup>.

- In northwest New Mexico, residents learned from notices published in the *Farmington Daily Times* and the *Rio Grande Sun* that a privately held oil company had petitioned a state commission to change the drilling rules governing a local gas pool<sup>34</sup>.
- In Sandwich, Mass., the new fire chief on Cape Cod was inundated with offers for a broken-down used fire truck after he published a bid notice in the weekly *Sandwich Enterprise*<sup>35</sup>.

These are merely the examples we found during this period that were reported. Notices published in newspapers drive public awareness of vital governmental and private activity on a daily basis. Their effectiveness is one of the major reasons many surveys have shown that the public overwhelmingly prefers to read notices in newspapers rather than on government websites<sup>36</sup>.

### The digital divide for public notice is growing

The gap between those who have access to digital information and communications and those who don't hasn't gone away. In fact, it's getting worse in terms of its impact on the usefulness of the internet as a distribution channel for public notice. Publishing notices exclusively on the web also disadvantages our most vulnerable citizens, who are cut off from the internet in far higher numbers than other, more privileged Americans, as the graphic below shows.

The latest figures indicate that 11 percent of American adults still don't use the internet<sup>37</sup>. Although that figure has remained relatively static over the last several years despite continuing

government and social service programs to promote internet adoption in underserved areas<sup>38</sup>, at first glance it still seems impressively low. But dig deeper into the numbers and you find that recent developments in *how* people access the internet are degrading its potential as an exclusive source of public notice.

Most significantly, a growing number of Americans can only get to the internet via smartphone. The latest figures show that over one-third of the population does not have broadband internet access at home<sup>39</sup>. That number is the same as it was in 2012, and home broadband figures have actually dropped eight percentage points in the last two years. Moreover, those figures don't even address the increased propensity for those

### Who's not online?

#### % of U.S. adults who don't use the internet (2018)\*



**11%**

of all American adults



**34%**

of those over age 65



**35%**

of individuals who didn't graduate from high school



**19%**

of population with annual income under \$30,000



**22%**

of rural population

\*Pew Research Center



who have home broadband to spend less time there as their preferred method to access the internet increasingly shifts to mobile devices.

That’s a real problem because smartphones aren’t an acceptable alternative to newsprint for the dissemination of public notice. In fact, mobile connectivity wasn’t even included in the most recent Digital Divide Index compiled by Mississippi State University (“MSU”)<sup>40</sup>, primarily because data caps and small screen sizes limit meaningful access to the kinds of applications that concern policymakers frustrated with the digital divide. “It is much harder to complete a job application or complete a homework assignment using a smartphone that also has limited data,” said Dr. Roberto Gallardo, the author of the MSU report<sup>41</sup>.

Data scarcity and tiny screens also present significant impediments to searching for and reading public notices, which rely in large part on the serendipitous process of discovery encouraged by newsprint. It isn’t reasonable to expect people to “discover” public notices on their smartphones, and it borders on the ludicrous to assume they will search for notices on their mobile devices despite the extra cost and sheer physical difficulty of doing so.



For public notice, smartphones aren’t an acceptable alternative to newsprint

The digital divide also remains an especially significant hurdle for certain segments of society—those who live outside of metropolitan areas, the population aged 65 and older, and younger adults who have less education and lower incomes. Here are the most recent numbers, which actually understate the problem because they include the one-in-five American adults who are smartphone-only internet users<sup>42</sup>:

Another recent study suggests the problem in rural America is even worse than those numbers suggest. According to the study, almost six-in-ten rural Americans believe lack of access to high speed internet is a problem in their area, and almost 25 percent call it a “major problem.”<sup>43</sup> The severity of the problem is no accident. Rural areas are less likely to be wired for broadband services and generally have slower internet connections than the



Moving public notice to government websites would be like hiring foxes to guard the henhouses

rest of the country.<sup>44</sup> There are also fewer broadband providers operating in rural areas so consumers there tend to have limited options when subscribing to high-speed services.<sup>45</sup>

“(Internet access) is essentially the gateway for participation in the 21st century economy in the United States,” said Phillip Berenbrock, senior policy counsel for the nonprofit Public Knowledge.<sup>46</sup> It is also a gateway to civic engagement; moving public notices exclusively to the internet would increase the barriers to community participation already faced by the most-vulnerable Americans.

### **Newspaper notice keeps foxes away from the henhouses**

Why did our forefathers originally decide to enact public notice laws in the first place? After all, *they were* the government. Why didn't they just publish the information they considered vital for citizens to know and be done with it?

The answer is obvious: Because they knew it wasn't wise simply to trust those who work for the government—neither the living nor future generations—to always provide that information unless there was a legal sanction for failing to do so. They understood that men and women are fallible, and that public notice laws would be required to ensure that government officials act in a manner that serves the public and not their own interests.

As Ronald Reagan was fond of saying: “Trust, but verify.”

Requiring independent, third-party newspapers with a financial and civic interest in ensuring that public notices run in accordance with the law was our legislative ancestors' way of verifying. Giving government officials the means to hide public notice information that may be embarrassing, or that simply doesn't suit their interests, is a surefire way to guarantee they're going to do it. It doesn't mean they're bad people; it's simply human nature to seek to avoid embarrassment or criticism.

The inescapable truth is there are too many ways for public officials to hide information on websites under their exclusive control. And removing newspapers from the public notice process would eliminate an important check on that

tendency and exponentially increase the risk that vital civic matters will be hidden from the public.

Newspapers also routinely report on many of the notices they publish<sup>47</sup>. Moving those notices to government websites would increase the likelihood that reporters won't see them and that the public won't benefit from the increased exposure notices receive when the information they contain also appears in news stories.

### **Verifying publication is difficult-to-impossible on the web**

The adequacy of public notice is often challenged, especially when important civic matters or large sums of money are at stake. For instance, failure to run proper notice has recently resulted in foreclosure reversals, nullification of legislation<sup>48</sup> and regulations<sup>49</sup>, invalidation of zoning changes<sup>50</sup>, road waivers<sup>51</sup> and election results<sup>52</sup>, and threats to city budgets<sup>53</sup> and utility rate increases<sup>54</sup>. That's one of the fundamental reasons public notice statutes have always required newspaper publication: It provides a simple, fail-safe means to verify that notices were run in accordance with the law. Publication on the internet is still incapable of providing that assurance.

**Digital notices are fraught with the potential for modification so they're less reliable than print**

Notices rendered in ink in a newspaper cannot be altered once they are published. By contrast, notices that are digitally published are fraught with the potential for modification. Websites can be hacked and altered; government sites are especially vulnerable<sup>55</sup>. They can be taken off-line through normal service disruptions, extended power outages, denial-of-service attacks<sup>56</sup> or ransomware demands<sup>57</sup>. Public notices on websites can even be fabricated to cover up the fact they were never published.

The distinction between the durability of paper and the impermanence of digital documents is clearly manifested in how they are treated as evidence in courts of law. Paper documents—including notices published in a newspaper—are self-authenticating under federal<sup>58</sup> and state rules of evidence, so they can be admitted into evidence at trial without additional proof to support the claim the documents are legitimate. Digital documents require a much higher standard of

proof<sup>59</sup>. Some courts have even “expressed deep skepticism about the underlying reliability of digital evidence and subjected it to far greater scrutiny than applied to non-digital evidence when deciding whether to admit.”<sup>60</sup>

The shortcomings of digital notice are especially hazardous in the case of foreclosures, where due process concerns are heightened. Hundreds of court cases in non-judicial foreclosure states have recognized publication in a newspaper as valid service of process<sup>61</sup>, while no cases we are aware of have ever endowed publication of a foreclosure notice on a website with equal weight. Moreover, federal law controlling HUD loans requires notice be published in a newspaper. Publishing foreclosure notices exclusively on the internet has the potential to jeopardize the validity of the entire foreclosure process.

### **Governments aren’t prepared to publish notice**

There is ample evidence demonstrating that state and local governments simply can’t be trusted with the exclusive responsibility to publish notices on their websites. In fact, we already have examples of government agencies that consistently fail

to publish electronic notices in jurisdictions where they are legislatively mandated to do so<sup>62</sup>, even though there’s little incentive for anyone to track it. Moreover, many state and local bodies find it challenging even to publish the notices they’re required to run in newspapers; there are multiple news reports every month about official meetings that must be rescheduled because newspaper notices weren’t published, or because they were published too late or neglected vital information required by statute. The problem would be exponentially worse if newspapers—which have a civic and financial incentive to ensure that notices are run—were removed from the process.

Government websites also tend to be slow, insecure and difficult to navigate. A recent study found that “(s)tate governments clearly need to improve their websites to provide the public with easy and secure access to e-government services and information.”<sup>63</sup> The study assessed 400 U.S. state government websites and tested them for best practices relating to four different criteria. “Virtually every site—99 percent of all tested websites—failed at least one of the tests.”<sup>64</sup>

## Moving public notice to government websites would be another example of the state usurping matters better left to the private sector

As the study suggests, governments struggle with their websites; it's not their core competency. By contrast, the free market demands that newspapers operate their websites well; those that don't suffer financially. So making government the exclusive distributor of notice would represent another example of the state usurping matters better left to the private sector.

### Website notices leave no historical trace

Newsprint properly preserved remains usable for decades;<sup>65</sup> stored on microfilm, old newspapers presumably can last for centuries.<sup>66</sup> The relative inviolability of newspapers has long been an essential element of their historical role as messengers of public notice; it helps to ensure published notices will be available for future use by the judicial system, researchers and historians.

The great majority of websites don't enjoy such longevity. Although digital documents are intrinsically capable of being preserved forever, a bare

fraction survive for longer than a few years. "Digital data lasts forever, or five years, whichever comes first," said RAND Corporation computer scientist Jeff Rothenberg.<sup>67</sup> "(O)ur digital documents are far more fragile than paper. In fact, the record of the entire present period of history is in jeopardy."<sup>68</sup>

Documents on government websites are especially vulnerable to evanescence. The problem is so acute independent researchers have convened conferences to address it.<sup>69</sup> "The internet is a terribly unstable way to keep information available," said a researcher who attended one of the conferences. "A huge number of references to websites no longer work."<sup>70</sup> In fact, those reading this

“ Digital data lasts forever, or five years, whichever comes first. ”

—RAND Corporation Computer Scientist, Jeff Rothenberg

## Publishing accurate notices that people actually read entails substantial cost

document in digital form two years or more after it was published will be likely to find that most of the website addresses included in the footnotes will be obsolete. Probably not this one<sup>71</sup>, though.

### **Publishing notices on the internet is “cheap” only if it’s done poorly**

Every time a bill moving public notice from newspapers to government websites is introduced, proponents make unsupported claims that the change would make public notice “free” or “cheap,” or that it would “save money.” Those claims are either ill-informed or disingenuous, because publishing notices—and doing it correctly—entails substantial cost. Newspapers spend time and money proofing the text of notices; working with clients who may not understand underlying statutory requirements; scheduling notices for publication; posting them on their websites; and issuing affidavits verifying their publication. They also expend resources on website security and data

backup, and on marketing to promote readership. Those recurring operational costs won’t magically disappear if the notices were shifted to government websites.

Governmental units statutorily required for the first time to publish notices on their websites would also entail substantial front-end, capital expenses for software, website design and development, hiring and training personnel and, perhaps most significantly, marketing. After all, the public is accustomed to finding notices in their newspapers. Retraining citizens to look for them instead on government websites would only be inexpensive if public officials decided not to concern themselves with whether the notices are actually read.

The smaller the government body, the more painful those expenses would be. When New Jersey recently considered and rejected legislation that would have moved public notice from newspapers to government websites, the Republican mayor of a small town in the state explained why he opposed the measure. “This is a bill we did not ask for,” said Nicolas Platt, mayor of Harding Township, population 3,838<sup>72</sup>. “We don’t manage our web sites that well. It makes sense to rely on newspapers for the small amount we get charged for this service.”<sup>73</sup>

### **Proposals to eliminate newspaper notice focus on the wrong goals**

Legislative or bureaucratic initiatives to move notices exclusively to government websites are never a response to grassroots, citizen input. In fact, as we previously noted, when the public is polled on the issue they state a preference for newspaper notice.

So called “e-notice” proposals are invariably prompted by elected officials, government employees or narrow corporate interests. The public policy arguments they make in support of the change are always revealing. It is *never* about increasing transparency in government. Elected officials generally cite cost or ill-examined assumptions about the decline of newspapers and the inevitability of the internet. Government employees and corporate executives often speak in the language of efficiency—e.g., how it would be quicker and easier if they could post notices on their own websites rather than having to deal with newspapers.

For instance, here are some of the reasons cited by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (“IDEM”) in its recent proposal<sup>74</sup> to move notice of air proposals from newspapers to its own, infrequently visited<sup>75</sup> website: “E-notice is becoming a much more convenient, cost-effective, and expedient method of communicating important agency notices and actions than newspaper publications. ... IDEM anticipates that converting to e-notice as the primary method of public notice will enable permitting authorities to communicate permitting and other affected actions to the public more quickly and efficiently.”

The IDEM proposal never once bothers to discuss whether the changes will lead to increases in government transparency or public participation in the permitting process. Nevertheless, it includes all of the arguments typical of those advanced by government employees in support of similar proposals in other states.

**Government transparency, not bureaucratic efficiency, is the goal of public notice laws**

## Conclusion

Newspapers in the U.S. have a long and rich tradition of serving the public by keeping government transparent and accountable. They have played a vital role in the development and sustenance of our democracy not only by reporting on community news and public affairs, but through their role as stewards of statutorily mandated public notice. Our forefathers selected newspapers for that role due to their accessibility and independence from the government, and because they provide a verifiable and archivable means of disseminating official announcements.

However, ill-considered assumptions and fascination with the internet have given rise to legislative proposals in which government websites serve that role instead of newspapers. These proposals make little sense when one considers that newspapers already publish public notices on their websites, and their websites are better and attract significantly more eyeballs than the sites operated by state and local governments. Moving notices to government websites would also eliminate them from the newsprint editions of local papers, which are inherently superior to websites for notifying citizens about official matters. Exclusive notice

via the internet would also disenfranchise residents of rural areas as well as our poorest and least educated citizens. Governments simply aren't prepared to be the exclusive publishers of official notice—a role that has been handled ably for decades by private-sector newspapers.

Lawmakers should be encouraged to enact statutes requiring governments to publish public notices on their websites, but as a supplement to—not a replacement for—newspapers and their websites.



# Endnotes

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<sup>6</sup> Shannon E. Martin, *Newspapers, Official Advertisements, and the Intentions of Public Notice Laws*, 5 N.J.J.Comm. 104, 106.

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# Far More People Visit Newspaper Websites Than Government Sites

## Nebraska

Site	Average Monthly Visits	Global Rank
Omaha World-Herald	3,253,000	25,289
City of Omaha	113,847	401,305
Douglas County	55,965	638,417
Washington County Pilot-Tribune & Enterprise	46,776	881,006
Washington County	8,505	N/A
Hartington Cedar County News	12,483	4,748,899
Cedar County	<5,000	N/A
Sidney Sun-Telegraph	16,100	2,813,725
Cheyenne County	7,837	N/A
Norfolk Daily News	234,439	244,115
City of Norfolk	12,755	N/A
Madison County	7,077	2,468,446
Kimball Western Nebraska Observer	8,600	3,275,623
Kimball County	<5,000	N/A
Fairbury Journal-News	6,400	3,648,054
Jefferson County	<5,000	N/A
Hastings Tribune	124,948	402,787
Adams County	10,460	1,822,796

Monthly Visits and Global Rank from SimilarWeb report produced Dec 2018, covering Sept-Nov 2018. Global Rank ranks in descending order the traffic of most public websites, e.g., Google.com is #1.

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