

Public Notice . . . It's your right

Written by Ellen Mortensen
Thursday, 16 March 2017 16:51 -



I have a confession. Until just within the last couple of years or so, I've never paid that much attention to the newspaper's legal section. Now I have worked in community newspaper for well more than a decade, and from time to time I have perused the legals just to see what's going on—because frankly I'm a bit of a “nosy Nelly”.

I have occasionally looked to see what was happening at local meetings, who had purchased property or changed their name. But the significance of our newspaper legal notices has never really resonated with me. Until now.

Like so often happens with us humans, we fail to realize what we have until we no longer have it. And right now, we are in imminent danger of losing our legal notices in community newspapers. You might be thinking, “So what? How does that affect me?” Well believe it or not, it does.

I would venture to guess that at least some of you reading this do not regularly read the public notice section of our paper. If you are one that does, thank you! The rest of you might count on your local reporter to tell you what you need to know about a certain meeting or what's happening in town of importance. And while I make every attempt to be fair and accurate in my reporting, I am only human.

I liken it to trusting someone else to tell me all about what is in the Bible. There are lots of scholars, and certainly lots of opinions, but when I want to know what it says I go directly to the source and read it for myself. When you want to know exactly what happened at a city council or school board meeting, your best resource is the meeting minutes that are posted in the public notice section of the newspaper.

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There are many in the government who want to see that changed. Currently a push is underway to remove those legals from the media and put them on a government-run website—which of course they will control. Do we trust them to be honest and forthright with the information they post? That's up to you to decide.

Personally, I can't think of much of anything worse than a government controlled media. Those who are pressing the issue—with New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie leading the charge—argue that the only reason newspapers are fighting to maintain the right to run public notices is because those entities have to pay for those notices. That is true, and there is no denying that financially it would hurt newspapers to lose them. But it goes much deeper than that. No one in the newspaper business will ever tell you we are in it to make money.

Our job is to inform the public today, and to preserve today's history for tomorrow. It is a responsibility that I and every other newspaper editor I know, take very seriously. We hate to make mistakes. We hate to print inaccurate information. But not nearly as much as we would hate to lose the ability to keep you, the public, fully informed.

Read your public notices—it's your right to know.