



IOWA NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION

October 24, 2014

To: Local Government Mandates Study Committee

Senator Wilhelm, Co-chair	Representative Kaufmann, Co-chair
Senator Feenstra	Representative Heartsill
Senator Hart	Representative Pettengill
Senator Rozenboom	Representative Staed
Senator Taylor	Representative Stutsman

From: Iowa Newspaper Association

Re: Public Notice advertising

Thank you very much for allowing the Iowa Newspaper Association time on your agenda to address public notice advertising and its value to Iowans and to an open and transparent government. Historically, the Iowa Legislature, along with the legislatures in every other state in the nation, has determined that it's good public policy to require local government officials to disclose to taxpayers in writing the actions they've taken and how they've spent public tax dollars. Here are just a few of the reasons why.

Public notices are the only objective and comprehensive account detailing the actions of our elected officials:

Opponents of public notice advertising sometimes suggest that newspapers should be covering meetings of public bodies in the first place and should not be charging to publish the minutes. While no newspaper in Iowa can afford to send reporters to every government meeting held in its coverage area, more importantly, the news writing process would dictate that not every action taken by the public body would be reported. The published notice is the only truly objective and comprehensive account detailing the actions of our elected officials. Public notices are published in newspapers to assure distribution, readership and accountability.

Iowa newspapers remain the best source for local news. A 2012 statewide readership survey conducted by Newton Marketing and Research of Norman, Oklahoma*, concluded that 85 percent of Iowans read their local newspaper. Eighty-six percent of Iowans believe public notices should be published in newspapers (up from 71 percent in a 2009 survey). This study showed that readership of these notices is better than that of sports news.

Public notice advertising, on average, is discounted over 80 percent:

Opponents also characterize newspapers as being financially subsidized by publishing public notice advertising. Newspapers are no more subsidized for accepting money for these required notices than are other commercial entities for charging local government a fair price for the products or services they provide. The fee newspapers charge for the notices is most often significantly less than the price charged to other advertisers for identical space in the paper. A survey of 45 Iowa cities publishing notices in their local newspapers revealed an average discount of 85 percent. Public notices serve as low-cost accountability insurance. As long as schools, cities and counties regularly publish accounts of their meetings and detail how they have spent taxpayers' money, no citizen can accuse these government units of trying to hide behind a cloak of secrecy.

And, opponents claim that thousands, sometimes millions, of dollars could be saved by posting these notices on government websites. Well, the Iowa Newspaper Association spends thousands of dollars a year putting all public notices published in the state on a single, searchable Internet website, www.iowanotices.org. If you Google “Iowa public notices”, the search engine will show you that the most popular site for this information is the INA’s site which was **created by newspapers to add value to public notices at no extra cost to local governments.**

Even though this is the most popular Iowa public notice website, few Iowans take the time to look for public notices there (or anyplace else on the Internet). According to Google Analytics, from October 1, 2013 to September 30, 2014, the number of “absolute unique visitors” (different people) who went to the site was 14,500. That pales in comparison to the number of different Iowans who read public notices in newspapers.

The total print circulation of Iowa newspapers is 989,063. Total readership is 1,978,126. The 2012 Newton research shows that 56.7 percent of those readers, or 1,121,597 Iowans, read public notices usually or sometimes. That means the ratio of readership of public notices in newspapers compared to the most robust public notice website is 84 to 1.

And, over 33 percent of Iowans said they would “not at all be likely” to read the notices on the Internet. In fact, **over 38 percent of Iowans say they have never gone to any local government website for any kind of information.**

“Cost savings” of Internet posting is a myth:

Opponents argue that Internet posting is far less costly than print advertising -- but it doesn’t come without costs. Setting up and properly maintaining, updating and archiving a reliable website costs thousands of dollars. Loading material, putting it in the right places, building in adequate search engines, managing the files, guarding against hackers and archiving the material, all cost money.

Let’s explode the myth that real cost savings would be achieved by moving notices from newspapers to the Internet. Surveys conducted by the INA and organizations representing local governments show the total that any Iowa city/school/county spent on all public notices in recent years averages **less than one twentieth of one percent** of the local government’s annual budget. And most, if not all, of these costs would remain if public notices were distributed properly on the Internet or in city newsletters. The cost per thousand Iowans reading the notices would skyrocket since the survey shows clearly that few Iowans will go to the trouble of searching for this information on the Internet.

Even if posting notices on government websites were cost-free, it would be a waste of time if Iowans didn’t see them!

And the Iowa League of Cities says small cities can’t be expected to maintain a website:

Last summer, the Iowa League of Cities made the case for why public notices should not be published on government websites. In its written comments to the Iowa Public Information Board, in response to a proposal to change the notice requirements for public meetings, the League wrote, “...*although the website requirement is not likely to be a serious problem for large Iowa cities, the same cannot be said for Iowa’s small cities. The larger cities are very likely to have websites where meeting agendas are already posted, so that new requirement should not cause a process change. However, for smaller cities we expect that in some cases the website posting requirement would be a problem. Iowa has nearly five hundred cities with a population of five hundred or less. While a few of those cities have websites, many only provide basic contact information, and*

are only updated on an annual basis. Those cities would now be burdened with posting requirements for the website. Moreover, we are aware that some cities only have a Facebook page, or a presence of some kind on the local chamber of commerce website, often with only basic contact information provided. It is unclear whether the proposed legislation would require these cities to post meeting notices on those websites. If so, it certainly would be a burden on these small communities.”

According to the League’s website, 65 cities that are required to publish notices (those having a population of more than 200 and a newspaper in their city) do not have a website.

These same cities that can’t maintain, or even develop, a website cannot be expected to post notices in a timely manner? The League itself has said that’s not possible.

Verification of publication would be lost:

When a newspaper publishes a public notice, in effect the newspaper is acting in the role of a third-party verifier or auditor of the notice. The newspaper is responsible for typesetting and preparing the notice for print and is responsible for signing a sworn statement of publication once the notice is published. Allowing local governments to put notices on the web rather than publish them in the newspaper removes those critical verification and auditing roles. How, if challenged, could a governmental agency prove that it posted adequate notice on its website in a timely manner? Imagine the battles between, say, a community group and a planning commission, with the group saying it didn’t see a hearing notice on the website. Does there exist a verifiable affidavit for web posting?

Newspapers offer maximum opportunity for the public to be aware of the workings of government. The Newton survey found that 83.2 percent of Iowa newspaper readers usually or sometimes look to their newspaper for news about local government. Newspapers bring order, accuracy and reliability -- along with objectivity and credibility -- to publishing city, school and county notices.

Newspapers push this information to lowans:

It’s unlikely that many newspaper subscribers decide to subscribe to their local newspaper just for the public notices. It’s even more unlikely that lowans would think about going to the Internet just to find their local notices. But newspapers regularly “push” the information contained in public notices to the vast majority of lowans who come upon them as they read the local content they have paid the newspaper to receive. In order to read notices on the Internet, lowans would have to remember to “pull” this information from the Internet on a regular basis. It would be unwise to base public policy on the expectation that citizens would remember to “pull” this critical information on a regular basis when they now have it conveniently “pushed” to them in their local newspaper.

*Survey conducted in September, 2012. Margin of error: +/- 4.5% at the 95% confidence level.

DO PEOPLE REALLY READ PUBLIC NOTICES?

The newspapers of Iowa wanted to know, too.

That's why the Iowa Newspaper Association commissioned a study by Newton Marketing and Research, Oklahoma City, in September, 2012.

The results of the study are almost overwhelming. Iowans read public notices in newspapers and that's where they want them to stay.

Public notices are better read in Iowa than sports news.

Why are public notices important?

An important premise upon which the principle of democracy is based is that information about government activities must be accessible in order for people to make informed decisions.

How long do public notices last?

Unlike the Internet, newspapers provide a timeless repository of important documents and information. Public notices in newspapers don't evaporate into cyberspace days after they are posted. Notices in newspapers are a permanent record.



86% of Iowans believe **state and local government should be required to publish public notices in newspapers.**

92% of Iowans **find their local newspaper trustworthy when publishing public notices, compared with only 68% who find a government-sponsored website trustworthy.**

Why should public notices be published in newspapers?

That's where they've been available to the public for 200 years. Newspapers are a respected third party - not like a government agency posting public notices on the agency's own website.

Newspapers have the responsibility to publish public notices in a timely, complete and accurate manner. Nobody has ever "hacked" a newspaper - unlike Internet sites where public notices have mysteriously disappeared.

**IOWANS
WANT TO READ
PUBLIC NOTICES
IN THEIR NEWSPAPER**

77%

**of Iowans read their
local newspaper**

Public notices published in Iowa newspapers
are also posted at **www.iowanotices.org**
at no charge to government agencies.

*Putting public notices on
hundreds of government websites
is the best way to make sure they will
NOT be noticed by the public.*



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ASSOCIATION**

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**DOES
ANYONE READ
PUBLIC NOTICES?**

**Iowans have
spoken and the
answer is clear...**

YES!