



May 25, 2021



Dear Member of the House Local Government Committee:

The undersigned organizations oppose any legislation that provides the option to remove public notices from newspapers of general circulation and urge you to oppose [House Bill 955](#). Newspapers' combined print and online reach to Pennsylvania taxpayers far exceeds any other alternative for public notices.

More than 7 million Pennsylvanians read a printed newspaper every week. More than 18 million unique visitors went to four of the state's largest newspaper websites in March 2021 alone, according to Comscore media measurement analytics.

Newspapers are, by far, the most convenient, wide-reaching and established place to see public notices. In contrast, web traffic to many government websites is so low that it cannot be measured; many small municipalities do not even have websites or, if they do, they are not frequently updated. Spreading public notices across thousands of local government websites or other print publications would make it impossible for taxpayers to keep track of government activities or hold government accountable.

Public notices are already on newspaper websites, in front of paywalls and available to all taxpayers. Pennsylvania newspapers also created an online searchable database for public notices available at www.publicnoticepa.com, which is provided at no cost to the government or taxpayers.

The publication of public notices by the independent third party that is Pennsylvania newspapers builds trust in the democratic process. It keeps a critical business function within the private sector, fostering open and robust competition in a free market economy. That, in turn, is good news for Pennsylvania businesses, Pennsylvania workers, Pennsylvania taxpayers, and Pennsylvania government. As has been demonstrated throughout the coronavirus pandemic, it is critical that government be more transparent, not less.

Public notices must also be archived and verified by an independent third party – again, Pennsylvania newspapers – to withstand legal challenges. Allowing government agencies numerous and undefined publishing options including internet-only publication would result in significant costs, uncertainty among Pennsylvanians, and lead to litigation. Newspaper publication, in contrast, has been unequivocally affirmed by state and federal courts nationwide as verifiable evidence of notice.

Removing public notices from newspapers of general circulation would cause great damage to government transparency and accountability. Pennsylvania newspapers guarantee efficiency, independence, and that the most people will have access to public notices, including significant populations that are not online:

- Up to 23.2% of Pennsylvania residents do not use the internet; 27% of seniors do not use the internet; and 41% of seniors do not have broadband access at home, reported the U.S. Department of Commerce (2020) and the Pew Research Center (2019).
- 31 percent of the state's farms do not have broadband access, according to "The Economic Impact of Agriculture in Pennsylvania: 2021 Update" from the state Department of Agriculture and Team Pennsylvania Agriculture Advisory Board.

Furthermore, lower internet usage persists among minorities, lower-income households and individuals with disabilities.

A 2019 Penn State study commissioned by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania found that vast swaths of the state do not have broadband internet, and not one county in the commonwealth can say that more than 50% of its population receives broadband connectivity as defined by the Federal Communications Commission. Newspapers are the primary channel for communicating matters of crucial public importance to those residents.

Although proponents of HB 955 argue that such measures would result in cost savings, government will spend more money to take over public notices. Solicitor fees, which must not be confused with newspaper public notice costs, will remain. With thousands of local governments and authorities in Pennsylvania, municipal costs would increase annually for development, software, training and maintenance as well as the personnel costs related to uploading, archiving, and maintaining the notices, content management systems and websites. Even with millions spent, government websites have repeatedly failed to meet their promised goals, including campaign finance reporting, the workers' compensation online system, and more. Hacking is a problem that continues to plague government websites at the local, state and federal levels.

Pennsylvania newspapers provide government with the lowest advertising rate given to comparable advertisers, and public notice costs typically fall very far below one-quarter of 1% of a municipal or school district budget. Because newspapers view the publication of these notices as a public service, they edit and fact check them at no cost to government agencies and, ultimately, at a savings to taxpayers.

It is not in the best interest of citizens, the government, business community or taxpayers for public notices to be removed from print newspapers. They, coupled with their vast online reach, are unmatched in their proven ability to reach across and into the communities of this commonwealth. Should HB 955 come to a committee vote, we encourage you to vote "no."

Thank you in advance for your careful consideration of this important issue.

Respectfully submitted,

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