

LEADER & TIMES

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To: Kansas Legislature
From: Earl Watt
RE: Public notice testimony

The goal of limited government is to make sure the taxpayers are informed about the expenses of government.

Whether it is a bid for a public purchase, changes in codes, or even the attempt to seize property in a storage unit, the best way to keep the public informed is to require government to provide public notice of its actions.

Years ago, I discovered that school districts were required to print the top 10 salaries within the district. No one was following the statute until I pointed it out.

I received the public notice in a manilla enveloped marked "highly confidential" even though it was required to be printed by the district.

The next year the district lobbyist approached the Kansas Legislature and had them remove the requirement, and the Legislature listened to the district lobbyists with the excuse that it would save money for the district to not have to print that list which, they claimed, could be made available to any citizen since it was a public record.

Which do you think would cause districts to be more responsible to the public, requiring they print their top salaries for the public to see, or place the burden on the public to seek out the information via a public records request?

Which do you think best helps the taxpayers keep their costs low, the few dollar spent on notifying the public, or saving the few dollars while seeing salaries climb?

To maintain integrity, the required public notices MUST be turned over to papers of record and distributed to the public through private means.

The least visited websites on Earth are public sites. They are not intended to be legitimate news outlets. They are seeking to protect their own self interests, which almost always involves more of itself — more employees, more equipment, more cost.

The argument that newspapers should simply report on these issues as a matter of news with no fees is no different than asking newspaper to report on a grocery store sale as a matter of news. The cost of maintaining public news is high, and having a staff working to produce local news and distributing is not a free service. However, the law protects municipalities by making sure the minimal fees charged are the lowest fees available and cannot be raised by more than 10 percent in any given year.

Government releasing its own information is not objective nor is it highly sought.

For example, Seward County's Facebook page has 2,244 followers while the Leader & Times Facebook page has 7,279. Obviously, local newspapers drive much more traffic and provides legitimate news rather than propaganda releases.

If we are going to keep government accountable to the people, it requires public notice.

If you do not require them to release their information to legitimate community newspapers, both with traditional print as well as online, you will end the public oversight of government activity.

Expect bids to see less participation and higher prices. Expect a less informed public on changes to local rules. Expect fewer people to be aware of proposed tax increases and expanding government.

But when we print legal publications, more people show up to public hearings, more people challenge rate hikes, more people pay their delinquent taxes, more people bid, and more people are informed.

While not everyone reads the newspaper, not everyone votes, and even fewer seek information about government on a regular basis on government websites.

Those who do read the paper also talk to their neighbors and friends and help disseminate the information to the public. It is a fallacy to believe this is an effort to reduce the cost of government knowing what the final result will be.

The only support for encouraging a less informed electorate must come from those who want bigger government. The only support for a less informed electorate must be to encourage a more expensive government. The only reason to not support public notice would be to hide something from the public with obscure government-controlled websites by government -controlled bureaucrats and high-paid government web staff who are trying their best to accomplish their goals with as little public oversight as possible.

Thomas Paine said, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one."

Why would we believe that the necessary evil of government should be in charge of its own information?

Government must be required to release their information to those dedicated to keeping the public informed, those whose mission is to see government operate in the light.

Self storage units have two parties involved, the owner and the person with property in the unit.

Make no mistake, this is the first step to eliminating public notice altogether.

The public has every right to know if property is about to be seized. No one — no one — will be seeking these notices out on social media pages.

True supporters of self government place the responsibility of seizing property on the government and the landlord to make this information public.

Eliminating that requirement is the death of open government.



Owner/Publisher

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