

# WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

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Rep. Mark Hutton, chairman, House Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development

Re: HB 2237

Rep. Hutton and committee members,

I'm offended, confused and concerned by HB2237 and I hope you won't recommend its passage.

As Vice Chairman of the Washington County Republican Committee, I thought transparency was one of the tenets of our party. Having public notices published by newspapers allows for a neutral and independent party to be in charge of the dispersal of information about the government's activities. When printed in newspapers, the notice is essentially set in stone and cannot be changed. It is part of the historic record, free from editing, tampering or intentional cover-up.

Why would any self-respecting Republican ever think it is a good idea to put government in control of their own information? I can only imagine the sort of comments I'd hear during my local Central Committee meetings if I'd bring up this concept.

I can't believe someone from my own party introduced this bill. I'm offended by what feels like a betrayal from my own people.

I'm confused about the perceived need for this bill. I've heard claims of great savings for local government units who would no longer be required to publish legal notices in legal newspapers. The proclaimed cost savings have been consistently overstated.

I checked out the bills for FY2014 for my three largest local government entities in Washington County in my newspaper, the Washington County News.

- City of Washington - \$392
- USD 108 Washington County - \$340
- Washington County - \$9,786.88

The largest portion of the county's bill is a \$6,048 delinquent tax list publication that runs for three weeks in August. I only have that "official county newspaper" status once every three years because in Washington County, it is rotated between three weekly newspapers (Washington County News, Hanover News, Linn-Palmer Record.) But while that delinquent tax listing seems expensive, the county is allowed to pass on the cost by charging each delinquent taxpayer \$15 per listing to make up for the publication cost, taking away much, if not all of the expense.

I've heard comment about public notice publications costing up to 2 mills of a government's budget. For Washington County, 1 mill equals \$75,671. So even in the high year of 2014, the bill for the county's legal publication responsibilities was only .13 mills. The estimate of 2 mills is way, way off.

I've also heard bills supporters say online publication would reach a new generation of citizens, who "don't read newspapers." This is only partly true - demographics have changed and many young people do get their news online (often from newspaper websites,) but most newspapers have some version of internet presence where public notices can be seen online. Plus, the Kansas Press Association has invested heavily in a site "kansaspublishing.com" where all public notices are already published in an archived, searchable form.

While internet usage is growing exponentially, there are still plenty of people who do not use the internet, especially trying to find public notices. In a newspaper, public notices are easy to find, and even if people aren't specifically looking for them, they often accidentally come across them as they flip through pages, thereby securing more knowledge of government activity as a result of the newspaper format. Don't we want our citizens to be aware of our government activity?

Society is not at the point yet where paper can go away.

I'm concerned because removing the legal notice publication requirement in newspapers would have a drastic effect on my small business. While my newspaper has been around for 146 years, we are in a time of transition right now. I've been trying to bolster my business by hiring new employees to add extra original content to gain more customer interest. Subscription revenue pretty much pays for printing and postage. Advertisement/public notice revenue pays our salaries.

Except for me, the rest of my staff is part-time. In 2014, the total revenue for the WCN from all legal publications from county, city, school district and townships equaled \$13,136.88, which is 9% of my advertising revenue. Cut that out and I have no choice but to cut my staff. A small business like mine does not have the margins to absorb this change of public notice requirement. I love living in my small town (Palmer, population 107) and raising my five children here. The last week has been a very disconcerting one considering the potential impact on my income by someone from my own party who wants to take responsibility and revenue away from a small business and put it in government's hands.

I adamantly oppose this bill and hope your subcommittee won't recommend it's passage. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dan Thalmann, publisher  
Washington County News