

INDEPENDENT ELLSWORTH COUNTY REPORTER

March 16, 2015

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

Re: House Bill 2237

Attached is an editorial we wrote months ago about our friend, a lifelong resident of western Kansas who has dabbled in local and state politics for decades. A year or more ago he stopped attending meetings of his local school board, something he had done off and on for years, because the district announced it would no longer mail paper meeting notices and the agenda, choosing instead to issue the information over the internet. Our friend has never owned a computer nor does he intend to spend many hundreds of dollars to purchase one or to pay a monthly fee to remain connected.

Now, some members of the Kansas Legislature would create such an environment statewide, where cities, counties and school districts could in practice deny anyone without a computer access to their decisions.

This past week, Salina Rep. J.R. Claeys introduced HB 2237 that would allow the government entities to continue publishing their public notices in newspapers, as is now required by law, or in the alternative post them on internet sites of their choice, thus bypassing the print version.

This is an economic issue for many newspapers, especially smaller publications in rural areas, because revenue from public notices can be a significant factor in success or failure, a quality product or just getting by. The Independent-Reporter, for instance, receives roughly \$17,000 a year for public notices. That amount is split between five cities, the county and two school districts. That comes to less than \$2,500 a year or a small fraction of the entities' total budgets.

However, let's be clear about this. Keeping public notices in newspapers is an issue that goes far beyond dollars and cents.

The intent of the current law is transparency, based on a belief that citizens have the right to be informed about the decisions made by the men and women they elect to represent them. Newspapers play an important role in that effort by providing an independent, permanent record that cannot be altered.

Newspapers also act as a clearinghouse, a central location that provides a single home for publication. The alternative is forcing voters to scan multiple government websites for public notices.

Does anyone seriously think that's going to happen?

Government bodies often erect walls to protect themselves from the ire of voters; however, in recent times the walls seem to have grown taller and thicker. A request for public information that used to arrive in the next day's mail now demands an official, written inquiry, sometimes from an attorney. It can take days or weeks to obtain.

HB 2237 is bad legislation and, if successful, has the potential to make it even more difficult for citizens to track the actions of their elected officials. We believe this should be the deciding factor as you and your committee consider this legislation. Does HB 2237 improve the public's right to know? We think the answer to that question is a definite "no."

Respectfully submitted,

Linda Mowery-Denning
Editor-Publisher
Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter

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DEFENDING PAPER

*The latest technology can
sometimes limit information*

Aug. 28, 2014

Linda Mowery-Denning

Editor/Publisher

A good friend, who has long been involved in the workings of local government in northwest Kansas, received this notice several months ago:

"Colby Public Schools has replaced the costly method of compiling, printing and mailing paper board packets with a paperless meeting solution called BoardDocs LT. This service is 100 percent web-based. By making meeting agendas and supporting documents available on the internet, Colby Public Schools will be able to distribute documents associated with board meetings more quickly, efficiently, and at a reduced cost to the district ...

"Due to this change, you will no longer be receiving a mailed copy of the board agenda. Instead, you may access the agenda via BoardDocs on any electronic device that has internet capabilities."

There's only one problem. Our friend does not have a computer. Nor an Ipad. Or any other way to access the board agenda at his farm several miles from the nearest town.

It's a great example of the shortcomings of today's seemingly unlimited access to technology. It's not unlimited for everyone. While the internet can deliver information to our homes at the click of a mouse, technology also has the ability to deny information to those without access to the web.

Our friend has not attended a school board meeting since he received the notice — and he has no intention of buying a computer. He isn't the only one.

The Ellsworth City Council recently went to Ipads, which isn't a bad idea if you happen to share their technology. Many don't. The Independent-Reporter, for instance, receives council information via e-mail from city clerk Patti Booher and then prints it out so we can take it home to read over the weekend. We have considered purchasing Ipads; however, they would not be compatible with our computers.

Another change we've noticed comes at the meetings. In the old days, when paper was still acceptable, agendas were available to council visitors as they walked through the door. That is no longer the case.

In both of these instances, elected representatives are trying to streamline operations, thus saving time and taxpayer dollars. That's a good thing.

At the same time, they also need to keep in mind there are many different levels of technology and when decisions are made about the type a school board or city council or county commission plans to use, access — even for those without a direct connection to the internet — should always be a factor in the equation.

After all, it's hard enough to get taxpayers involved in local government. Technology shouldn't make participation even more difficult.