

As I opened my property tax statement I notice that my property tax has just increased 20% from last year. On my way home from the post office I stop to get a bite to eat and notice that the price I paid for this cheese burger was a few cents more than last week. Concerned, I call the County Clerk's office as I have known her for years and try to get to the bottom of this. I learn that the hospital found its self in financial trouble and No Fund Warrants were needed; the only way to pay them back was by assessing a higher mill levy. Then that wasn't enough; so the commissioners placed a ballot initiative to raise the sales tax the 1% that they had been holding back on doing for years to help the hospital again. When I asked why I wasn't aware of these changes, she replies, "It was posted on the counties website, you didn't notice it?" That is what would have happened in our county this year if there were no notices in the local paper. The tax increases are real, but at least we knew they were coming and had the opportunity to oppose them if we had chosen.

My name is Cliff Blackmore, I am the owner and publisher of the Elkhart Tri-State News which is in its 124th year of publication, perhaps the oldest continually operating business in Morton County. I have come here before you, looking for support on a matter that I am afraid is going to be detrimental to rural Kansas. House Bill 2237 which is before the Local Government committee would remove legal publications from local newspapers; if counties, cities, or school boards so choose. I will list my problems with this proposed legislation.

1. Transparency. A school board or city council could use the option to switch from posting in the paper to posting on line as leverage against the local paper. Suppose that a bond issue is not going to be popular with the voters in a district. Or perhaps there is a scandal that the local paper becomes aware of. The option to do one or the other would be powerful leverage to force the local paper to keep quiet about matters that it may not be comfortable dealing with in public view. Transparent government is government that is truly the one the public deserves.
2. Senior Citizens. Most of my readers are over the age of 60 and some if not a majority have no desire nor the technological experience to go to a web site to search for information. I have asked my readers if they wanted me to put out an online edition and the lack of interest in this makes it financially impossible to undertake. There are even parts of our county that have limited, if any access to the internet.
3. Economics. I have heard the argument that it will save money. Maybe in Wichita or Olathe; but not in Elkhart, or any other small community. I am able to create two jobs in my town that otherwise would not be here. I employ a single mother of 3 and a house wife who is returning to work for the first time in decades. Neither has the right combination of technological abilities and flexibility at home to work in a traditional work environment. I venture to say that they are a good representation of most of the work force in small town newspapers. If we were to lose those legal notices, they would no longer have a job. I could not afford to pay them and myself. Legal notices account for approximately 20 to 30 thousand dollars a year in revenue; when divided between, 2 school districts, 3 cities, 3 cemetery districts and the county the cost is minimal compared to what these entities would incur as the result of delegating an employee to the task of properly maintaining this information on a website.
4. Social Costs. As we are forced to cut staff in a tough economic condition in Western Kansas the State would then have yet more citizens requiring additional assistance from government, ie. Unemployment, nutrition assistance, etc. In many instances the local newspaper is the bond that holds these communities together and is their window into the outside world. Many absentee land owners in

our county subscribe to our paper. We have had subscribers in New York, Washington State, Oregon, Wyoming, Florida, Tennessee, Colorado, California, North Carolina, Arizona, New Mexico, New Jersey, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Missouri; as well as all over the State of Kansas. These absentee owners help employ people to manage the lands and other properties that they own and rely on public notices and local news when they make decisions on how to staff and manage their operations. The result of a lack of information could potentially cost even more jobs, thus perpetuating the flight from our rural counties.

Members of the committee, I appreciate the time you have allowed me today. I currently hold office as a City Councilman, and personally I enjoy it when my constituents make their comments and concerns available. It allows all of us who hold the public's trust to make judgments based on the realities of the day and not the theories that sound good until put to practice.