



# TODD NOVAK

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## **Guest Column from Rep. Todd Novak (Dodgeville)**

### **The Publishing of Public Notices**

**February 28, 2017**

When you read your weekly or daily newspaper, do you read the minutes from a school board meeting or the details of an ordinance passed by your municipality? All of these notices can be found in the public notice section of your local newspaper.

In the age of the internet, a debate is growing as to whether or not these notices still need to be published in the newspaper or if they can simply be posted on your local government website.

On one side, school districts, municipalities, and counties have been steady in their push to put their notices online. Their argument? It's less expensive to put notices online than to publish them in the local newspaper. On the other side, the newspaper industry is adamant that published notices allow the public to effortlessly access what local government is doing. They argue that by eliminating local newspapers from the equation, government transparency will take a hit.

The elimination of printed notices in the newspaper has been gaining steam. In his budget, Governor Walker has proposed that the state be required to publish only certain notices in the newspaper for an estimated savings of \$24,000 over the next biennium. This will also apply to school districts, municipalities and counties. No longer will local governments be required to publish a printed version of meeting minutes and other public notices on local ordinances. Everything would be moved online with the exception of any document that is intended to inform an individual of an opportunity to exercise a right such as election documents, referenda, notices of public hearing before a governmental body, and notices of meetings of private and public bodies. These will still need to be published in the newspaper.

My professional background gives me a unique perspective on this issue. I was a newspaper editor for 25 years and can see the value of public notices, and I've also been the Mayor of the City of Dodgeville since 2012 and understand how much it costs to publish notices.



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As a local and state government official, I want the public to have as much information as possible. It doesn't matter if they gather their information from a government website or if they read it in the public notice section of the local newspaper. In many areas of the state, newspapers are the lifeblood of a community and sometimes the only convenient source of information. By allowing the electronic option, we are cutting off a source of information to our constituents, our taxpayers, and the people who hold us accountable. At this time, the savings obtained by not publishing notices does not outweigh the public's right to know. As the Joint Finance Committee works on the governor's budget, it is my hope they remove anything related to the elimination of the publication of government notices. We can still debate the merits of this issue, but it should be as stand-alone legislation where it can be discussed at the committee level and on the floor of both the assembly and senate.

Access to government should never be diminished, and I fear that once we start down this road it may become a slippery slope.

(Rep Todd Novak, Dodgeville, represents the 51<sup>st</sup> Assembly district which includes parts of Green, Lafayette, Iowa, Sauk and Richland Counties)