



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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A Column for Immediate Release

Modernizing Meeting Minutes

By Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt and Sen. Duey Stroebel

There was a time when newspapers were the best method for local units of government to communicate with their constituencies. It was common for detailed articles telling the stories of local legislative activity to appear in print. Because of newspapers' prominence in the media market, for many years Wisconsin has required most local government to purchase space to publish meeting minutes, agendas, public notices, etc. in the local newspaper of record. In addition to the 88 publishing requirements in the state statutes, there are 487 mailing and 83 printing requirements placed on our government entities.

Most Americans get their news in different ways today. Fewer and fewer citizens are getting their news from traditional newspapers. There is now a superior, more cost-effective way to keep the public informed--the internet.

Of those 88 publishing mandates, recently introduced Assembly Bill 70 (AB 70) would repeal the requirement for meeting minutes (the record of already-conducted business) to be printed in the local newspaper. Instead, posting minutes on a website and one public place would be sufficient. This will save taxpayers money while still allowing the public to be well-informed.

The 'sunshine' required by AB 70 casts far more light than the ever-shrinking distribution of newspapers can offer. Anyone with internet access has the ability to quickly locate meeting minutes on the website of the particular government entity. A simple search of a few such websites finds the information to be organized, archived, written in larger print, easily searchable and produced in a more timely and potentially more detailed fashion than in the newspaper. In fact, oftentimes video of the entire meetings is available. If no website exists, minutes would continue to be published as current law requires.

A 2013 Census Bureau study showed nearly 80% of Wisconsin residents had access to high speed internet. This number is certainly higher today and will only continue to climb with additional rural broadband initiatives being implemented across the state. On the other hand, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center study, nationwide newspaper daily readership had plummeted from 41% to 23% in the previous 10 years. Surely this decline has continued.

The newspaper industry is fighting to keep this inefficient mandate. Scare tactics are being deployed of local units of government hiding activities and “reporting on themselves.” This is nonsense. Meeting minutes would continue to be written and approved by the same governing bodies, will continue to be easily accessible to citizens, and will likely be more thorough in content since they will no longer be billed by ‘column inches’.

Ironically, the newspaper industry touts their website, www.WisconsinPublicNotices.org, as part of the justification for continuing to require taxpayers to assist in keeping the print business model afloat. While the website is serviceable as a clearinghouse for public notices, we were able to locate specific meeting minutes much faster by simply going to municipal websites.

Some have argued that they can’t or don’t have internet access. This is certainly the case for a small, shrinking group of citizens, but it is far more economical to mail such individuals a copy of the minutes rather than require the purchase of newspaper space. Is the growing expense of purchasing print space a wise expense for such a small minority of taxpayers? We think it is not.

Finally, AB 70 seeks to bring equity. The City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, and Milwaukee Public Schools are exempt from publishing minutes. Wisconsin townships are exempt as well. Shouldn’t other governmental entities also be able to save your tax dollars in this way?

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