

Testimony on S.97

Angelo Lynn, editor/publisher Addison County Independent, Middlebury
Thursday, Jan. 11, 2018

Thank you, Senators, for holding this hearing and the opportunity to testify. I had hoped to be present at the hearing today, but will submit this written testimony in lieu and hope to appear at a later hearing, if necessary.

I've been the editor/publisher of the Addison Independent for the past 34 years. We are the paper of record for most of the 23 towns in our county. I also am publisher or co-publisher of the Killington-based *Mountain Times* and the *Brandon Reporter*, which both represent a good portion of Rutland County, as well as the *Essex Reporter* and *Colchester Sun*.

I have served in the past as president of the Vermont Press Association, and am currently on the board of the New England Newspaper Press Association based in Boston.

I defer to, and echo, the six specific points made earlier today by my colleague Martin Langeveld. He outlines well the permanent and incontrovertible nature of public notices printed in a paper of record, the reason behind the state statutes requiring public notices (openness and transparency), the open questions about how to determine websites of record and the point that no other state has implemented legislation that would permit online-only public notices of any kind.

Martin's sixth point is of key importance: *placing the public notice so that the affected community has a good chance of reading it.*

It's that point I'd like to briefly address on two fronts:

- 1) Readers are accustomed to searching for and reading information about their towns and their neighbors — even the smallest ones — in their local community newspaper. Whether that news be by a town columnist, a staff reporter covering local government, a letter to the editor, calendar items, high school sports, anniversaries, weddings, births and obituaries — the local newspaper is where residents still routinely go to find much of this information. That public notices are part of the news package is not only appropriate, but they are also easily found. What's unique about community newspapers, and print in general, is that subscribers do flip through most of the pages and it is easy to glance at public notice headlines to see if any pertain to your specific community. That is a big contrast to web sites, which multiple studies over the years have informed us that it is most rare for any reader to spend more than a few minutes perusing a news website.
- 2) Newsrooms at our newspapers, and most others I am familiar with, routinely check the public notices to be sure our news teams have not missed action items of community importance. To say this another way, *public notices are not just a source of revenue for our advertising departments, but also an important way our news teams don't miss even the smallest zoning board of adjustment changes, special hearings or other items that our editors determine are important for community members to know.* That's no small thing. In a county where we cover 23 communities, we don't have the staff to reach out to every town clerk, every week to check on Goshen's, or Whiting's, or Hancock's routine meetings, but by reviewing the public notices we receive, it helps us keep tabs on what's up in each community and whether a reporter needs to delve into an item or two to provide more information of public concern. *Insuring public notices are in papers of record help keep those papers better informed and, consequently, do a better job serving their communities. It is, and has long been, a two-way street.*

One final comment is trying to understand the financial implications of public notices. As reporters at the national level are quick to suggest, follow the money and there's your story. Perhaps.

It is true that if one central online organization were to get "paper of record" status for each of the state's 251 towns, the total annual revenue would be substantial. And with that substantial sum of money, they could perhaps, at first, lower the per piece price. That's how the marketplace works. Towns, therefore, could save a very small percentage of their annual budgets — a minute number that has been discussed before.

But at what cost, and would the public be better served? Is it reasonable to suggest that — unprompted — any resident would routinely visit a central statewide website to randomly check if their town had a public notice to review?

Community newspapers, on the other hand, could use the extra revenue to maintain their vitality. While it's not the largest portion of our revenue stream, it's important and for most it could mean the difference of being able to hire a reporter, or two or more for the larger dailies. But as importantly, it is the connection to the news that would be hampered.

This is not to suggest that a central online databank is not a good idea. It is, as Martin Langeveld has previously testified, and we agree with Mr. Laneveld that a good way to do that is through the Vermont Press Association.

Thanks for listening.

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