

To the members of the Vermont Senate Government Operations Committee,
honorable Chair Senator Jeanette White:

January 21, 2022

Senators,

I am unable to testify at your January 21 hearing today regarding S174 and want to share this preliminary written testimony to become part of the record.

Regarding this bill, which would allow the state and towns to publish legal notices and other notices on limited digital platforms, nothing has changed since the last time there was an attempt to divert public notices from Vermont weekly and daily community newspapers.

First – the historic system of using Vermont’s local weekly and daily community newspapers for public notices is not broken. It does not need to be fixed. The system remains very effective.

Second – Website hits on a digital platform do not translate into informed citizens in the affected towns. This means people in Middlesex may not have a clue about what a proposed zoning ordinance means to their neighborhoods or how a proposed development might impact them despite the fact that some digital platform touts X number of hits on its website.

Third – Paper records are permanent and become part of the permanent records of a town. Digital platforms, fail, get hacked, crash, have limited lives, storage capabilities etc.

Fourth – Centralized repositories of public notices do not receive the added impact and contextualization that happens when trusted local newspapers report on the issues that are subject of the notices – essentially giving towns twice the bang for their buck. Don’t expect some far-off website to cover your planning commission hearing when a developer is proposing 10, 50 or 100 new homes on your town green. Local newspaper fund reporters who cover local projects so townspeople are informed.

Fifth – Income from public notices is important for newspapers. Across the county we are hearing of more and more towns that have lost their local newspapers and those residents are living in news deserts. This makes for poorly informed citizens to the detriment of democracy. Local newspapers rely on legal advertisements from their communities as part of their revenue stream. Cutting the stream would further accelerate and exacerbate the issue of news deserts in our country and in our state.

The Vermont Press Association believes there are far more important issues for you to be considering this year. As noted, the system is working just fine.

Lisa Loomis, President Vermont Press Association

Owner/editor The Valley Reporter, proudly serving The Mad River Valley for 50 years