

A Letter to the Editor

Every county in Kentucky has one local business that has been there longer than any other, most more than a century – while some are even closing in on two centuries. In many of these counties, that business is their local newspaper.

I manage two of those local newspapers. The Oldham Era has been in operation for 149 years and is looking forward to celebrating our 150th next year. The Henry County Local has been publishing 168 proud years and counting. I also assist regionally with 13 other area newspapers with similar tenures.

Newspapers are the heartbeat of every community in Kentucky. We exist to inform, to raise awareness, to build community, to be the voice of those that can't always speak for themselves, to cover local government and hold local officials accountable, to help local businesses grow, to enact change, to celebrate achievements and to archive our community's history.

Our founding fathers felt so strongly about the importance of newspapers and the role we play in communities that we are the only profession explicitly named in the Constitution of the United States of America.

There are three ways in which newspapers have effectively carried out some of our most important roles – covering local government, keeping officials accountable, keeping citizens informed and helping transparency exist: public notices, open meetings and open records.

Without these three in place, knowing how your tax dollars are being spent, what bids are available and being rewarded, what decisions your elected officials are making for you, when meetings are being held and what new ordinances are being considered would not be as easily accessible.

There is currently a bill, HB368, that seeks to remove legal notices from newspapers and place them on government websites. Websites that are run by the government themselves. What could go possibly go wrong with that?

When a legal ad is placed in a newspaper, it is placed in the local newspaper, dated and cannot be changed after the fact. In addition, it is placed on a website managed by the Kentucky Press Association where all legal notices in Kentucky can be found easily – kypublicnotices.com.

HB368 seeks to have entities including county and city governments place public notices on their own websites, yet many have only one employee, if any, and can't even keep their current websites updated. I found one city website in my area that hadn't been updated with meetings or ordinances since 2020. Two others had very little information, none of the council members were current and the monthly meeting time listed was listed wrong.

Officials have said they would create their own statewide website for all notices. I would argue that they are going to spend a lot more

money creating a website we have already created and maintained successfully. Right now, paid legal notices are currently a very small part of county and city budgets – only 0.16%.

So why change? Is this what is really best for the community? In counties of 80,000 or more a bill was passed in Kentucky to change the rules of public notices due to the cost of the larger newspapers. Yet, many of those counties, including Boone, Campbell, Fayette, Kenton, Madison and Warren, have decided that newspapers are still the best way to get their notices out and have continued to place them in newspapers despite the change.

Regardless of the county size, public notices should be posted by a third party, and with a newspaper in almost every county (and statewide website already in place) it just makes good, common sense.

Besides the concerns I've already addressed, while legal notices are not the only revenue that keep newspapers going – it is a part of it, and some smaller, rural counties will probably lose their local newspaper if this bill is passed. A community without a local newspaper is a community without a heartbeat, and countless studies have shown in news deserts across this country that there will be negative, long-term effects for the community.

No, it is not the job of the legislature to keep newspapers running but why are they so against doing something that maintains transparency and at the same time, would hurt some of the oldest local businesses in this state?

I'm not blind to the criticism of the media and think that cable news networks have hurt our industry as a whole. I was trained that a journalist is to cover the facts and to try and keep any biases out. I think your local newspapers do a pretty darn good job at still doing that. We have opinion/editorial pages that are open for opinions to be shared and topics to be discussed but they are clearly labeled and kept separate from the news content.

Your local newspaper employees are not pushing an agenda. We are actively involved and serving in our communities. We live, work, play and volunteer right alongside our community members. We take our role very seriously, and that includes publishing your public notices.

Any bill that seeks to change how public notices are handled, or diminishes public meetings or public records, is going to be harmful to the community, and your local newspaper, in the long run. I urge you to stand up with your local newspaper and help us keep these three in place.

Jane Ashley Pace is the publisher of the Oldham Era and Henry County Local, regional advertising manager for Paxton Media and the 2024 president of the Kentucky Press Association.



FRANKFORT — Representative Aaron Thompson, R-Russell, presented his first bill, House Bill 191, an act related to internment in states veterans' cemeteries. Lawmakers passed the measure during Friday's House proceedings. Submitted photo



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