

INDEPENDENT -R- ELLSWORTH COUNTY REPORTER

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To: Kristey Williams
Chairman
House Local Government Committee

From: Linda Mowery-Denning
Editor/Publisher
Ellsworth County Independent
Marquette Tribune

Re: Opposition to HB 2247 on public notice

Sales of the Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter are always good, but in the past two weeks they have been even better. The reason: a new sheriff walked into the local jail in January to find a mess — so much so that there is talk of a new facility, which, of course, will fall on taxpayers to finance. Even a major cleanup is expected to end in a bill to the county no one expected, especially our commissioners.

I'm sharing this story because I think it illustrates the importance of newspapers to Kansas communities. News of the jail issue spread through Ellsworth like a prairie fire and residents immediately turned to the Independent-Reporter for information.

That is a one-stop information service no government website can deliver.

The same is true with public notices.

This past week, legislation was introduced into the Kansas House that would allow cities, counties and school districts to either publish their public notices in the local newspaper or on government websites.

Let's get the financial implications of this proposed legislation out of the way. Since October, the start of our fiscal year, the Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter has received \$7,500 in public notice revenue. Most of that came from attorneys who publish estate notices in their local newspaper. That leaves the rest divided between the county, five towns and two school districts.

It doesn't amount to much, but for some newspapers — especially those west of Kansas Highway 81 — it could mean the difference between profit and loss. Not a very good trade.

That said, I believe an even stronger argument against the proposed legislation is transparency. Do lawmakers honestly think taxpayers are going to search government websites across the internet for information when right now all they have to do is open their local newspaper and it's all right there for them to read?

In the past, a major supporter of the shift to the internet has been the state organization of county treasurers because of the requirement they publish their local delinquent taxpayers list three times. They see a savings of dollars and cents. I would argue that what we should be looking at is the effectiveness of having your name in the paper as someone who has not paid their property taxes. I can't think of a better way to encourage someone to write a check before the list hits the paper for a second and third time. In addition, treasurers have the authority to charge the delinquent taxpayer with publication costs.

My prediction is that their collection rates would actually decline if their county's taxpayer list was not published in the local newspaper for everyone to read.

Despite the internet, newspapers continue to be a source of common ground for their communities, a place residents can go to read about their neighbors, the local school, the special at the hardware store and government activities, including public notices. The list goes on. No one else provides that kind of service to the communities they represent. For that reason alone, HB 2247 is a bad idea and should be given the burial it deserves.

Thank you for your time,
Linda Mowery-Denning