

Opinion

Legislators afraid of informed public

There is no doubt that Indiana residents believe in government transparency. Unfortunately, the same can't be said about our legislators in Indianapolis. The Indiana House of Representatives is expected to consider House Bill 1498 this week, a measure that will do away with a long-standing check on government – the publishing of public notices in newspapers beginning in the summer of 2022. The measure would give local government units the alternative to publish notices on a website controlled by the government unit, severely damaging the checks and balances currently in place.

The idea of public notices has been popular long before the advent of newspapers. The earliest known form of a public notice – the Code of Hammurabi – was carved on a pillar in Babylon some 1,700 years before the birth of Christ. In 1665, the London Gazette began carrying notices from the English King's Court and public officials of London and outlying regions.

Through colonial times, state governments used newspapers to publish notices and the new federal government followed suit in 1789. In fact, the acts of the first session of the U.S. Congress required the Sec-

retary of State to publish all "bills, orders, resolutions and congressional votes" in at least three publicly available newspapers.

In Indiana, the use of public notices predates statehood. Territorial Gov. William Henry Harrison offered \$500 to a printer who would start a newspaper in Vincennes so he could disseminate the laws of the territory. Elihu Stout took him up on the challenge and published the first edition of the Indiana Gazette on July 4, 1804, more than a decade before Indiana became a state.

Local government advocates believe allowing governmental units an option on communicating with its constituents will result in savings to taxpayers. What they fail to point out is that it also will reduce the chances that Hoosiers will see the public notices, thus reducing or eliminating transparency the public now has.

A 2017 survey found out that 63 percent of Hoosiers want public notices to be published in their local newspaper even when the question noted that it could cost government units several thousands of dollars. That same survey determined that the public would be 60 percent less likely to read a public notice if pub-

lished on a government website, rather than in a newspaper.

The government advocates also fail to mention that newspapers can't arbitrarily decide what to charge government units to publish their notices. The General Assembly capped what newspapers can charge state and local governments in 1927. The Hoosier State Press Association estimates all public notices published in a year cost the average adult Hoosier just \$1.06 of their tax dollars, a small fraction of the millions now budgeted on the state and local levels.

There is no doubt that today's technology was not dreamed of by the founding fathers of both the nation and the state. Newspaper publishers recognize that technology has changed drastically. In fact, Indiana law requires that newspapers, in addition to the publication of notices in print, must post their public notices on their websites at no additional cost to the government unit. Additionally, the HSPA has been collecting notices from its 150 member newspapers and posting them on indianapublicnotices.com, again at no cost to the state or local government units or anyone using the site.

Officials at the HSPA



have reached out to the leadership of the four legislative caucuses and committed to bring the Legislature a comprehensive modernization of the state's public notice policy for consideration in the 2022 legislative session.

HB 1498 begins and ends the public discussion of an important public policy that is an essential element of our democracy. The question deserves more thought and more input to craft a policy addressing all the elements of effective public notice which have been essential to the democratic process for centuries.

Are Indiana lawmakers afraid of an informed public? They may argue no, but this measure sends a totally different message.

We encourage and urge

our readers to contact our legislators in the Indiana House of Representatives and the Indiana Senate to vote against this measure if and when it comes up for a vote.

Our local legislators can be reached at:

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Stumbling blocks vs. stepping stones

As I sometimes do, this article is one that is written off the cuff. You may be wondering, "What does that mean?" When I get to the end of the article, I will be able to tell you what I have said.

I want to begin by asking some questions. What would you like to see happen in the year 2021? Do you have any expectations? Have you thought about what we might experience this year? Over the course of the last ten months I have been literally amazed at some of the attitudes of others. We all know that we have never seen a year like 2020 because we have never had one in our lifetime. I can testify from my viewpoint, it was a difficult

year for me due to the fact that I couldn't visit people the way I would like.

As we move into this New Year the virus is the consuming issue. How long will it last? Will I be able to get the vaccine? Will the vaccine work? Will the vaccine bring all this to a halt? We really have no idea what lies in store in 2021, or how it will personally affect each of us individually. I have some thoughts that might help you as they have helped me. Now, you must understand as I share these thoughts, I am trying to help us through this crazy time.

As I begin my personal remedy for 2021, I want to start with a poem by Emily

Matthews:

Life's Pathway

At times life's path seems filled with things that make the going rough.

And we wish there were a smoother road, for we feel we've had enough...

But if we pause a moment and remember Who's in charge.

The hills that loom ahead of us no longer seem so large.

For every rock before us, when we know we're not alone,

becomes not just a stumbling block, but one more

stepping stone.

How do you perceive events in your life? Do you see them as stumbling blocks? I often ask myself, "Is this the worst experience I have known?"

Human nature tells me, for the most part, we are all the same. We find it easier to identify stumbling blocks than stepping stones.

Why do we tend to wallow in the bad? Recently, I heard a politician say, "The darkest days of this virus are ahead of us." What a statement! Here we are a nation that is in a literal panic over this pandemic, and we want it to be worse. I have decided this year to deal differently with our situation than I did last year. This year, no stum-

bling blocks, all stepping stones. Now, just a side bar – turn off the news! You will be surprised how much better you feel and your thinking will not be as clouded.

I realized years ago that I couldn't let circumstances control my life, and I have tried to live by this principle. Even though circumstances shouldn't control our lives, they sure reveal our life. Let's be overcomers in 2021. This nation has faced much greater issues than this. We will overcome this like we have all those in the past. I would like to say, and you can quote me, the best days of this virus are ahead because this is simply a stepping stone.



JUST A THOUGHT

Rev. Tom Mansbarger

