

Opinion

Politicians playing hide and seek game

We continue to wonder, are our legislators in Indianapolis afraid of transparency? It appears to us that they are, for they are once again trying to hide public notices in a cloak of secrecy.

In February, the Indiana House of Representatives voted down House Bill 1498, which would have allowed state and local government to forego publication of public notices beginning in the summer of 2022. The measure, which failed 46-44, was sponsored by Rep. Doug Miller, R-Elkhart.

That, we hoped, would be the end of the matter for this session. But apparently not so for Miller and two of his co-horts, Sen. Jim Buck, R-Kokomo, and Rep. Wendy McNamara, R-Evansville, have worked to revive the issue during this session.

Buck authored Senate Bill 332, which provides for public notices where Indiana law requires multiple public notices. Under the measure, the first notice would be published in a newspaper, while any subsequent notices would be published on a government website. It is co-sponsored in the House by Miller and McNamara.

That measure, if approved and



signed into law, would begin July 1, 2021.

The measure has already cleared the Indiana Senate. It now awaits a hearing before the House Local Government and Regulatory Reform Committee which is chaired by – surprise, surprise – Miller. The committee is slated to have a hearing on the matter Wednesday, March 17, where it is likely to pass and go to the floor.

The Hoosier State Press Association, long opposed to any measure making access to public information harder to obtain, has asked Miller to make two amendments to the bill.

The first would

eliminate sheriff’s sales — which has such things as mortgage foreclosures listed — from the bill.

Sheriff sales notices are not paid for by taxpayers and not subject to state-mandated caps for publication of public notices. Revenue lost from subsequent notices for a sheriff sale is more substantial than the losses of publishing subsequent notices required by a government unit subject to the legislative cap.

The second amendment would move the effective date back to July 1, 2022, which would allow the HSPA to make good on a commitment it made to legislative

leaders to present a plan for a modern Indiana public notice policy.

Yes, the measure threatens to hurt revenue a newspaper receives. But that hit is minimal, as the General Assembly capped what a newspaper can charge state and local government units in 1927, nearly 100 years ago. It is estimated that such public notices cost the average taxpayer about \$1.06 of their tax money annually. A mere drop in the bucket compared to such other expenses the state readily incurs.

What we are most concerned of, as all Hoosiers should be, is the lack of transparency this tends to present.

According to the HSPA, 3 million Hoosiers read a printed newspaper during an average week. Of those, 60 percent of the adults read public notice advertising. Place the public notices online, an HSPA survey indicates, the number of people reading said notices will reduce 60 percent.

That same survey showed that 63 percent of newspaper readers believe government agencies should be required to publish public notices.

It’s time for Hoosier lawmakers to listen to the will of the people, the will of those who place them in the positions they now hold.

We ask the public to reach out to your legislators and let them know that Indiana newspapers, through the HSPA, will offer legislation vetted by leadership next year that will create a public notice policy that will transition from print-centric to digital-centric in an appropriate manner while still adhering to the four essential elements of an effective public notice – accessibility, verification, archivable and distribution through an independent entity that reports the news of a local community.

Ask them to support the aforementioned amendments if included in the bill. If they are not included, ask them to vote to kill the bill.

The newspaper industry isn’t trying to run away from a modernized public notice plan. Rather, we are actively pursuing a plan to address the matter in a fair and reasonable way. We are just asking for a little time to finalize a plan acceptable by all.

Your Indiana legislators can be reached at:

State Senator Andy Zay
Senate District 17
800-382-9467

State Representative Ann Vermilion
District 31
317-234-9499

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

We are excited to share with you the opportunity and investment of becoming a part of the Walkway of Lights. No event within five hundred miles can begin to match our magical event. We are grateful to be extending our invite to you and believe you or

your business would benefit from joining in promoting the tri-states’ biggest Christmas adventure.

In the past, we have consistently had over 60,000 vehicles go through the Walkway of Lights each year. This is an incredible opportunity for our community and

hope that you will support this wonderful event.

Each year, we continue to add new and exciting displays to this event. This year is no exception, with several new displays and others re-designed with advanced LED bulbs.

Last year’s marketing budget was in excess of

\$30,000, and we will spending over \$30,000 on advertising locally in the tri-state region.

Here is How You Can Impact and Participate:

We are looking for new sponsors for this season. You can participate by being a presenting, primary, or display sponsor

for this event. We can work out a financial package for you or your business that can be designed to fit your budget.

If you are interested in participating, a Walkway of Lights representative would be happy to meet with you at your earliest convenience. With over a

quarter of a million people expected to view this year’s Christmas City Walkway of Lights, you won’t want to let this opportunity pass you by. To set up a time to meet with someone, visit www.walkwayoflights.org.

WOL Committee