***Editor:*** *Please consider publishing the following op-ed. For more information, contact Ginni Linn, PSATS Director of Communications, at (717) 763-0930 or glinn@psats.org.* ***Note:*** *A copy of this op-ed and a photo of David M. Sanko are posted on* [*www.psats.org*](http://www.psats.org)*. Click on “Newsroom” in the horizontal bar across the page and then “News Releases & Op-Eds.” Click on David Sanko’s name highlighted in blue under the Op-Eds header to download his photo.*

**Townships Support Legal Advertising Reform that Saves**

**Taxpayer Dollars and Increases Transparency**

**An Op-Ed**

**by David M. Sanko**

Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS)

Harrisburg is considering a new law that would give townships and other local governments in Pennsylvania the authority to place legal advertising on local government websites and in community papers, in addition to the traditional advertising in local newspapers. House Bill 955 would give our member townships the flexibility to determine which options will best provide information to their residents, businesses, and potential vendors while promoting competition and transparency.

Legal advertising reform is a priority for our membership. PSATS supports any proposal for legal advertising that would, most importantly, improve access to legal notices while reducing costs to taxpayers and their local governments. This legislation would give local governments in Pennsylvania the freedom to place notices in more places and with greater access to their constituents, thus enhancing transparency and information sharing.

Local governments could choose where to place the notices, including existing print newspapers (if they choose), particularly in rural areas where internet access is still challenged. The public would be better informed, the township could save money by advertising on their own website or in less expensive community papers, and the local government could reach more people than ever before. Local governments could reach more people for the same costs or less! What could be better for the taxpayers?

Critics, however, would have you believe that local governments, including townships, will be the downfall of existing print publications because newspapers’ legal advertising revenue would decline. It is unclear if this is true, but what is known for sure is that it’s not up to local government taxpayers to sustain print publications by mandate. We wholeheartedly support a free press as defined by the Founding Fathers, but the world has changed, and many newspapers publish much less frequently or not at all. Where does that leave townships, which have important information that they must, by law, get out to the public?

As a result of decreasing circulation, newspaper advertisements are no longer an effective way to provide public notice to residents. The time and expense required could be better spent on more timely methods that taxpayers have a better chance of seeing.

Legal notices are expensive, too. Townships shell out hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars annually to newspapers of general circulation to comply with antiquated public notice requirements.

While the intent of these advertisements is transparency, which PSATS strongly supports, newspapers of general circulation are not free. Instead, paid subscriptions for print and electronic access are required to access many legal notices. Our members tell us that most residents are not purchasing print newspapers or electronic access due to the high costs. It makes no sense to require residents and taxpayers to pay for access to legal notices when they could be made available electronically or through other means that are free.

Our members note that posting notices on websites and bulletin boards is timely and effective. Even when newspapers provide free online access to legal notices, the public is unlikely to look at public notice websites to find information about their community. Instead, residents look for news about their township where you would expect it: on the township’s website and social media pages and in newsletters. This is where they go for information about community events, police service, trash and recycling service, road construction projects, meeting dates and times, and much more. Many townships post public notices on their websites because they are open and accessible even though they are not required by law to do so.

Pennsylvania is a large and diverse state. One-size-fits-all solutions are not effective and rarely work. Townships need to have the flexibility to determine the most effective public notice method, which may vary based on the audience for that public notice, as well as geographic location. This menu of options is far superior to the current mandate to use legal advertisements in a print newspaper of general circulation.

You can’t argue with lower taxpayer costs or the simple logic of getting as much information into the hands of township residents than ever before. Taxpayers are looking for – and demanding – that township legal notices be available in a different, more open and transparent way. Just as the COVID pandemic has pushed all of us to embrace new ways of communicating and doing business, local governments have responded by expanding their ability to communicate and operate in a new way, too.

Allowing virtual access to and participation in public meetings and instituting or greatly expanding their public websites and the information that can be found on them has increased public engagement and participation in a way that has not been seen in a long time. This is a good thing. Giving local governments an increased ability to publish notices where they can be most easily accessible to their constituents is also a good thing.

Our association looks forward to legislative action to help provide the public with timely, full, and unfiltered access to the information that is important to them.

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