

**Please Vote DO NOT PASS
On the AMENDMENT to House Bill 1380**

CHAIRMAN LONGMUIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

January 20, 2025

My name is Anne Ehni. I am the publisher of the Herald-Press, the official newspaper of Wells County, North Dakota. **Please accept this testimony OPPOSED to the amendment in House Bill 1380.**

This amendment would give counties the okay to post minutes on their website instead of in newspapers. We have the research proving **this is not what voters want.**

In a demographically weighted survey of North Dakotans in 2024:

- **85 percent said they believe public notices should be required to be placed in newspapers and 83 percent said they read public notices in newspapers either digitally or online.**
- **Respondents chose newspapers over city/county websites TWO to ONE as the most appropriate, reliable and transparent location for public notices.**
- **Eight out of 10 North Dakota adults – 82 percent – said public notices belong in newspapers over government websites. Only 18 percent said governments can be trusted to be the only source of public notices.**

Last June's vote on the publication of city minutes confirms the high percentage of voters who want minutes published. An average of **85 percent** of voters in 208 cities in North Dakota voted YES to publication of minutes in newspapers. In some towns, the vote was as high as 93 percent!

Submitted along with my written testimony, you will see a number of comments from citizens that delve into their attitudes about publication of minutes and I urge you to give those a look. **It's not that people oppose ALSO having notices posted on government websites, but they see a clear interest in having a trusted third party like newspapers involved in making sure publications occur.**

The majority of today's newspapers are both print and digital. There's also a free statewide public notice website maintained by NDNA called ndpublicnotices.com, where all public notices, including minutes, are published and accessible at no cost to the consumer or the county.

Despite any digital disruptions, newspapers have been since the First Congress of the United States the preferred vehicle for disseminating public information because they do a couple of things government websites do not: they are independent, verifiable, and archived for the historic record.

Verifying online publication is much more difficult than with newspapers. This is why courts subject digital evidence to far greater scrutiny than evidence published in newspapers. Significant numbers of people in rural areas still lack high speed internet access and our elderly have issues of cost, education and ability to access online content. Furthermore, some counties have a dismal record of providing minutes to newspapers, even though they are required by law to publish them.

Finally, please note that the amendment carries no mechanism by which to verify county compliance with website publication, while newspapers still have to provide an affidavit swearing publication has occurred. Newspapers are paid to make sure publication occurs. That's the true beauty of our current system and there's no way to replace it on a government website.

Once relegated to county websites alone, there is no mechanism to assure these postings occur and no penalty for failing to post them.

Thank you for considering this testimony. **I urge a DO NOT PASS on HB 1380.**

Anne Ehni, Publisher

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