

March 14, 2025
House Political Subdivisions Committee
SB 2069

Good morning Chairman Longmuir and Members of the Committee:

My name is Amy Wobbema, and I'm the publisher of two official county newspapers in central North Dakota, the Foster County Independent and the New Rockford Transcript.

I'm before you today in opposition of SB 2069, the bill that opens the door to allowing public entities to post any public notice on a government website instead of in newspapers.

Giving state and local governments the option to only post their notices on a website makes vital public information less accessible, easier to alter and more prone to online hacks. And most importantly, it also goes against the wishes of North Dakota voters.

In a demographically weighted survey conducted in 2024, eight out of 10 North Dakota adults – 82 percent – said public notices belong in newspapers over government websites. In addition, only 18 percent said governments can be trusted to be the only source of public notices.

Yes, we are keenly aware that not all North Dakotans read newspapers, and that once in a while we make a mistake and fail to publish a public notice. For those instances we have a statewide public notice website, ndpublicnotices.com. The site is free to access with no subscription required and includes all notices published in newspapers. This website is the solution to the backstop requested by our state agencies when we fail to publish.

In my testimony I want to address the former, the people who don't subscribe to newspapers. When they want to know where to find information about an upcoming hearing or bid opening, what are they likely to do? Well, Google it, of course!

I did a series of simple Google searches last night for various notices in several North Dakota counties to see what the average citizen would uncover online. Here's what I found:

For "Hearing Notice Walsh County," the No. 1 result on Google was the Walsh County Record, the official newspaper for the county, and right behind at No. 2 was the statewide public notice website, ndpublicnotices.com.

For "Notice of Bid Golden Valley County, ND" ndpublicnotices.com comprised the first three search results.

Even for "public notice Burleigh County," the newspaper's statewide public notice website was indexed on the first page of search results.

In fact, out of the first dozen searches I conducted, ndpublicnotices.com was listed on the front page in the top 10 search results every single time, and in many cases a North Dakota newspaper website was also in top results.

You might be wondering how the Secretary of State's online portal for public meeting notices fared in my search. I was too, because this is the website that N.D. senators proposed to upgrade at a cost of \$150,000 in a previous version of SB 2069. The reality: out of the first 10 searches I conducted, in all corners of the state, the SOS website only showed up on the first page of results ONE time. That was for "public notice Burleigh County," and in that case it was listed below the ndpublicnotices.com website.

Further, I want to point out that the ND public notice website is referenced in the state's century code, Chapter 46-05-09, which states that whenever publishing a public notice, the newspapers "shall publish the notice on a statewide legal notices website maintained by the North Dakota newspaper association." This was a proposal that North Dakota newspapers took the lead on several sessions ago, which the legislature agreed to and codified into law.

For these reasons and more, I believe ndpublicnotices.com already is and should continue to be the online source for public notices in our state.

Newspapers, both print and online, are the voice for North Dakota residents, as well as their eyes and ears on the actions of the government.

I urge a "DO NOT PASS" on SB 2069 as written, and I encourage you to consider the amendment NDNA has proposed. It's a solution that both provides a backstop for the rare instance when a newspaper fails to publish as proposed by the PSC and keeps public notice publication where voters overwhelmingly say it belongs: in newspapers, both in print and online.

Thank you for your time, and I am willing to stand for questions.

Amy Wobbema, Publisher
Transcript Publishing
817 Central Ave
New Rockford, ND 58356
(701) 947-2417
amyw@transcriptpublishing.com

