

January 22, 2025

**N.D. House Political Subdivisions Committee
House Bill 1380**

Chairman Longmuir and Members of the House Political Subdivisions Committee:

My name is Amy Wobbema, and I am the publisher of two newspapers in central North Dakota – the New Rockford Transcript and Foster County Independent. I'm writing today in opposition to House Bill 1380.

This amendment would give N.D. counties the authority to post minutes on their website instead of in newspapers. We think that's a bad idea. And based on both 2024 election results and a study conducted on behalf of North Dakota newspapers, citizens agree.

During the 2024 primary election, 94.88% of voters in the City of New Rockford said they wanted the city's minutes published in the local newspaper – 371 people voted yes, while only 20 said no.

The incumbent mayor of New Rockford ran unopposed in that same primary election, and the publication of city minutes got more votes than he did.

The results were similar across the state. An average of **85 percent** of voters in 208 cities voted YES to publication of minutes in newspapers. In some towns, the vote was as high as 93 percent.

There are very few legislative proposals and ballot measures that get that kind of support, other than maybe the request to name an overpass in Carrington after WWII veteran Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Miles Shelley, as we reported in the Foster County Independent last week.

While we don't currently put the question of whether or not to publish county minutes in the official newspaper on the ballot because it's already codified in state law, the North Dakota Newspaper Association did its own research to gauge public opinion about publication of minutes and other public notices.

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. Only 18 percent said governments can be trusted to be the only source of public notices.

On a regular basis, newspaper staff get asked if minutes from a certain meeting have been published in the newspaper. Our readers look for this information and use it to keep them informed. Additionally, if there is confusion about the intent of action taken by the commission,

both the newspaper staff and public officials alike will refer the citizen to the official minutes as published in the newspaper.

By giving the counties the option to only post the minutes in a digital format on their websites, it makes vital public notices less accessible, easier to alter and prone to online hacks.

Newspapers are the aggregators of information. We compile relevant and timely content and put it in front of readers, and a copy of every newspaper published in North Dakota is archived by the North Dakota Historical Society. Once our newspapers are archived, they cannot be altered. That gives newspapers the important distinction as historical records for every North Dakota county that are safe from alteration or deletion by dishonest politicians and online hackers alike.

Further, all county minutes published in newspapers are also readily available online, right along with other public notices. The NDNA-powered website, ndpublicnotices.com, is a one stop shop for all public notices published in North Dakota newspapers, making them free and easily accessible by anyone online.

With the facts not in their favor, some will make this all about money. The truth is, however, that the cost of publishing public notices is negligible in relation to county budgets.

Eddy County spent about \$2,900 in the past year to publish their minutes in the New Rockford Transcript. Further, they spent a total of \$9,400 to publish ALL required public notices in 2024. Last year was a presidential election year, during which they must publish several notices specific to the election such as sample ballots and abstract of votes for both the primary and general elections. During a non-election year, such as 2025, their total will be quite a bit less.

In Foster County, the bill totaled about \$6,500 to publish minutes and \$14,600 for publication of all required public notices in 2024. The commission in Foster County meets twice per month, compared to Eddy County's one meeting per month.

To put that in perspective, Eddy County will collect \$1.87 million in property tax revenue in 2025 and less than \$10,000 of that will go to the local newspaper to publish vital public notices. Based on their final, approved 2025 budget, Foster County will collect \$3.276 million in property taxes in 2025. In either case, that equates to no more than one-half of one percent, or a penny out of every \$2 collected in property tax by each county, being used to keep citizens informed.

Also regarding money, newspaper publishers don't get paid if county minutes don't run. We are also required by law to provide affidavits to prove that we have published official county minutes. The amendment in HB 1380 doesn't include any equivalent publication requirement for county officials. Who will make sure minutes get posted online in a timely manner, and what will happen if they don't?

To be clear, I am not opposed to having county auditors post meeting minutes on their county's website. Rather, if this bill is really about making county minutes more accessible to the public, then I'd propose that the law require publication BOTH in the local newspaper and on the county's website. That action isn't really necessary, however, because public notices are already available online on the newspapers' websites and at ndpublicnotices.com. This is yet another service newspapers provide to the counties and their citizens, made possible by the small fee we charge to publish public notices.

County governments pay a fee for every other service provided to them. They contract with private companies for all sorts of things on a regular basis. Publishing public notices and disseminating them to citizens is a service newspapers provide, and we do it well.

I urge a DO NOT PASS on HB 1380.

If you have any questions, please email me at amyw@transcriptpublishing.com.

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