

January 23, 2025

House Political Subdivisions
HB 1380

CHAIRMAN LONGMUIR AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

My name is Allison Olimb. I serve as the president of the North Dakota Newspaper Association, which connects the state's 73 newspapers. Please accept this testimony OPPOSED to the amendment in House Bill 1380.

SECTION 1. AMENDMENT. Section 11-11-37 of the North Dakota Century Code is amended and reenacted as follows: 11-11-37. Proceedings of board of county commissioners to be published in official newspaper or to official website - When published.

The amendment in question utilizes a very crucial conjunction that bothers me—
“or.”

When it comes to publishing online, where is the accountability? Who is the watchdog to ensure that publishing takes place? Who is responsible for following up? Who is going to make sure those websites are not edited, hacked, or deleted? What is the archival plan?

You are going to hear from many of my colleagues who are the designated “official county newspaper” and will have a financial buy-in. I do not. I am the editor of one of the two newspapers in Walsh County. Neighboring Grafton is the county seat and the newspaper there serves as the official county newspaper.

I am coming to you as a citizen, a landowner, a passionate advocate of rural North Dakota who lives in one county, works in another, and is impacted by decisions in both.

The one thing I can count on with our area newspapers is that there is a level of accountability. There often are news reports that give highlights of what took place in county meetings, but that is not the same as running an official record. The minutes are printed as presented, unedited and preserved in the state historical archives as designated by law because that is what newspapers do.

In the state of North Dakota there are 73 newspapers and 53 counties. While the conversation of “news deserts” is prevalent in modern media, what North Dakota lacks in concentrated media areas, we make up for in range. In full transparency, there are three counties that do not have representation in their borders. What they still have is representation in close neighboring communities that keeps that coverage intact. Every county is represented and it is their voters who select that publication.

When voters come to the ballots, time and time again, they choose transparency. They choose publication. They choose newspapers. An average of 85 percent of the voters in 208 cities voted yes to the publication of their city minutes.

A NDNA survey conducted by an independent third party found that respondents chose newspapers over city/county websites **TWO to ONE** as the most appropriate, reliable and transparent location for public notices. More than 80 percent of North Dakota adults 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.

The people of North Dakota trust us because we are good at our jobs, and you will be hard pressed to find someone more willing to fight for the public right to know than a North Dakota journalist. We have just as much at stake as our readers because we aren't just reporting on our communities, we are a part of them.

What my newspaper is responsible for is city and school minutes. When it comes to those school and city minutes we are responsible for, there are times when we are the ones making sure that they are getting in front of the people. We are making sure they are accessible. We are making sure they are documented and archived.

I believe that we live in a North Dakota that utilizes both print media and online sources to access information. I, personally, have both online **AND** print subscriptions to several area publications. What this amendment is missing is that our newspapers already provide that online step in making these records available. Should I need to access records online for anywhere from Pembina County to Slope County, I can find searchable documentation at <http://www.ndpublicnotices.com>, a North Dakota Newspaper Association website.

I am not opposed to online publication. I am opposed to “or”.

As a concerned citizen of the state of North Dakota I would urge a DO NOT PASS on HB 1380. Thank you for your consideration.