



PENNSYLVANIA STATE ASSOCIATION OF TOWNSHIP SUPERVISORS

Editor: Please consider publishing the following op-ed. For more information, contact Brenda Wilt at (717) 763-0930 or bwilt@psats.org. **Note:** A copy of this op-ed and a photo of David M. Sanko are posted on 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 or at www.psats.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sanko_Op-Ed.jpg.

**Want Transparency? Give Townships a Choice
for Providing Public Notices**

**An Op-Ed
by David M. Sanko
Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS)**

This is Sunshine Week in Pennsylvania, a time devoted to recognizing the importance of government transparency. The Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors (PSATS) has long supported the state’s Sunshine Law and has even published a guide for its members to encourage compliance with the law.

Over the past few years, as a global pandemic changed the way we do business, townships embraced new technology so they could comply with Commonwealth orders while continuing to provide critical governmental services openly.

Live streaming and Zoom meetings became common. Some townships embraced hybrid meetings, which they have continued post-pandemic to give the public and board members the option of attending in person or remotely. Townships found that these new meeting formats increased transparency and public engagement. Many also began offering certain services digitally and accepting payments electronically through their websites.

Along those lines, we recognize that the 2021 amendment to the Sunshine Law that requires the posting of meeting agendas in various places, including municipal websites, is intended to promote transparency. We appreciate that the law recognizes the critical importance local government websites play in communicating with their communities.

We hope that the General Assembly will take the next logical step and approve legislation that would give municipalities the opportunity to place legal notices prominently on those same websites as an option to expensive legal advertisements in paid newspapers.

The recent strike by union employees at the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* impacting delivery of

newspapers throughout southwestern Pennsylvania, a cyberattack on a newspaper in Lancaster County that prevented timely publishing, and the shuttering of the Titusville *Herald* in rural Crawford County, are just the most recent challenges faced by Pennsylvania municipalities forced to conduct their legal advertising through print newspapers. And that doesn't even count the supply chain and staffing challenges or equipment failures.

In these settings, communities are faced with an impossible choice: Break the law by using alternative methods of non-newspaper advertising or break the law by not meeting at all because they can't find viable advertising options!

It's an unnecessary headache for municipal officials. PSATS has long prioritized legal advertising reform for our membership, including any proposal that would improve access to legal notices while reducing costs to taxpayers and their local governments. Harrisburg should once again consider legislation giving municipalities the flexibility to determine which options will best provide information to their residents, businesses, and potential vendors while promoting competition and transparency.

The General Assembly acknowledged that the print/digital landscape had changed when it amended the Sunshine Law to require municipalities to post meeting agendas on their websites if they have one. Additional advertising options are warranted for municipalities equipped with the ability to reach a wider audience. These include advertising on township websites and in less expensive, widely disseminated community newspapers to ensure that residents and taxpayers continue to have ready access to information about their local governments.

Municipalities could choose to place notices in existing print newspapers, especially in areas where internet access prevents even local news outlets from having their own website, but they should not be mandated to sustain print advertising revenue. While we wholeheartedly support a free press as defined by the Founding Fathers, the world has changed and many newspapers publish much less frequently, or not at all, which requires municipalities to advertise in weekly newspapers, and that requires more lead time for public notices.

Residents look for news about their township where you would expect it — on the township's website, social media pages, and 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 already post public notices on their websites because they are open and accessible, although they are not required by law to do so.

One-size-fits-all solutions are not effective and rarely work in a state as large and diverse as Pennsylvania. Townships need the flexibility to determine the most effective public notice method. This menu of options is superior to the outdated mandate to use legal advertisements in a print newspaper of general circulation.

PSATS supports government transparency and a well-informed public. But it also supports the modification of Pennsylvania's legal advertising laws to reflect the public's changing news-gathering practices.

Giving local governments the 21st-century option to publish notices where they can be most accessible to constituents is not only common sense, it's also the right thing to do.

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About the author: David M. Sanko is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors. With a broad background in local and state government, Sanko oversees an organization that is the primary advocate for the commonwealth's 1,454 townships of the second class, which are home to close to 5.7 million Pennsylvanians and cover 95% of the commonwealth's land mass.