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Gray Town Council

Senator Baldacci, Representative Matlack, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, I am submitting this testimony in support of LD 876, an Act to Promote Efficiency in County and Municipal Government.

The Town of Gray requested that Senator Breen submit this bill on our behalf to provide relief to ours and many other small Rural Towns in Maine. The requirement that all hearings be advertised in a local newspaper seven days ahead of time had great value when it was originally set up. However, over time, it has become cumbersome and costly as the newspaper industry had become protracted and more residents obtain their information online.

Like many rural Towns, Gray has moved online to expand our communication with our residents. We publish notifications on our website, via e-mail blasts directly to residents, on our outdoor message signs located in high traffic areas and on our social media platforms. In addition, direct letters are mailed to impacted residents/abutters or targeted groups based on impacts. To meet the current statute, we also advertise in the Lakes Region Weekly (Forecaster) which is now a part of the Portland Press Herald. This paper is printed on Fridays with a deadline for submissions the previous Monday. Our Council meets on Tuesdays.

Mon Feb 15th - deadline day

Fri Feb 19th – publication day

Tues Feb 23rd – 7 days prior

Tues March 2nd - meeting day – total 15 days to advertise – 1st reading

Mon March 1st – deadline day – this is BEFORE the 1st reading meeting on March 2nd

March 5th – publication day

Tues March 9th – 7 days prior

Tues March 16th – meeting day – 2nd reading

Tues April 6th – meeting day

As you can see, in order to meet the 7 day notification requirement, submission is required 15 days in advance. The 2nd reading submission must be done 1 day prior to the FIRST reading/meeting. This means if there are any substantive changes brought forward during the 1st reading/public hearing, the 2nd reading notification is for not. A new 1st reading must be set up and advertised with the next possible meeting option 2 meetings later adding up to 3 more weeks to the process. The Town also loses the \$100 per submission fee. The Town is left with either rolling the dice on the fee or waiting to advertise and automatically adding 2-3 weeks to the EACH ordinance change or public hearing notification. \$100 may not seem like much, but over a calendar year, it can add up. \$100 would buy around 181 first class stamps to do direct notification to impacted residents.

Residents can opt to have the LRW delivered to their homes, but many simply pick it up for free at designated locations – post office, grocery store, bank, etc. During the last year, with closures and restrictions, many residents no longer had access to the paper. In that time, participation in our online public hearings/forums has not gone down; in fact, participation has increased.

The Portland Press Herald is another option for Gray; however, is substantially more expensive and reaches fewer residents than the local weekly paper. When time permits, it is likely Gray would continue to advertise in the LRW as all communication channels are valuable; However, we respectfully ask that the mandate to do so be lifted. Allowing rural, small Towns to advertise via methods already in place – websites, e-mail blasts, social media and direct mail – would provide a more efficient cost effective way to deliver the services and results residents request without impacting the ability for residents to participate.