

Sun Journal

Morning Sentinel

KENNEBEC JOURNAL

Sen. Baldacci, Rep. Matlack, members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Judith Meyer and I am editor of the Sun Journal, the Kennebec Journal, the Morning Sentinel and six weekly newspapers in western Maine.

I am here today on to speak in opposition to LD 876, An Act to Promote Efficiency in County and Municipal Government.

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You will hear from a number of others today about the business side of Maine newspapers, but I am here in my role as a longtime advocate of public access and the role our newspapers play in upholding full and fair access for our readers. In my work as vice president of the Maine Freedom of Information Coalition and my service on the legislative Right to Know Advisory Committee for nearly 20 years, I have seen firsthand how vital public access is to people seeking information to make the best decisions they can for their families and their communities.

The public relies on legal notices to know when public hearings are scheduled before our planning boards and boards of selectmen. When towns are clamping down on illegal junkyards. When counties are selling public property. When, as we saw [during last month's public hearing on the proposed amendment to the Kennebec River Management Plan](#) to remove the Lockwood Dam in Waterville and the Shawmut Dam in Fairfield to allow endangered Atlantic salmon to move upriver to spawn, people rely on legal notices to learn about public hearings so they can fully participate in government.

Public notices are announcements of things of real weight in our communities, and printed notices serve as the most efficient and effective clearinghouse for one-truck contractors – like painters, landscapers, snowplow operators – to know when towns and counties are seeking competitive bids.

The bill before you wrongly assumes that every Mainer has access to the internet and that everyone also has the skillset to navigate the web. They don't, and far from it.

Maine's default assumption is that 85,000 households do not have access to internet of any kind. That assumption is based on data so incomplete that officials at the highest levels within the Federal Communications Commission acknowledge they really don't even know how many Americans have access to the internet because mapping data is so inaccurate, as the Sun Journal

recently reported in a [recent investigation into broadband access in Maine](#). Or, more correctly, the lack of broadband access.

We know with certainty that there are thousands upon thousands of Mainers without online access; any move to push legal notices online as the sole access option disenfranchises an untold number of people. And, we can be sure that the highest number of the disenfranchised are low-income who cannot afford computers and internet service, and those who may not be comfortable with the technology, including many among our elderly, and those in the most rural areas of our state where internet service is not available and may never be available.

The idea that legal notices -- which inform the public of legal proceedings -- would be available only for those with digital access directly contradicts the very concept of **public** access to government.

Additionally, the hop-skip-and-jump of requiring anyone seeking legal notices to check hundreds of municipal and county websites -- many of which are not updated on a regular basis or even on a yearly basis, calling into question whether municipalities are even equipped to maintain legal notices in real time -- creates an unnecessary burden for people who now can view all legal notices on a single page in our newspapers. And, if they're web savvy, on a single online clearinghouse for public notices maintained by the Maine Press Association at [MaineNotices.com](#).

The reality is, if a town is seeking the best bid on snowplowing, for example, it is to the town's advantage to ensure the most eyeballs possible see any request for quotation so the town is assured of getting an array of bids. By creating an unnecessary and burdensome requirement for interested vendors to hunt and peck around for these things, towns may end up with far fewer bids and be forced to spend more than necessary. That is not responsible government.

This proposal does not "promote" efficiency. It creates an unwieldy and unworkable treasure hunt for contractors looking for work and for the public seeking access to legal announcements in their communities. Most importantly, it creates a platform of privileged access only for those who can afford it.

The suggestion that only the most web proficient people who live in the most affluent and highly populated areas of Maine with reliable internet service are able to find and read legal notices creates gross inequity across the state, and is undeserving of support.