

**Ohio Senate  
Local Government Committee  
December 3, 2024  
Interested Party Testimony on HB 315**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman O'Brien, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member DeMora, and members of the Senate Local Government Committee. My name is Beryl Love, and I am the Executive Editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and Ohio Regional Editor for the USA Today Network. Thank you for allowing me to testify as an interested party on House Bill 315, which proposes various changes to township law.

My testimony is focused on the provisions of this bill that impact public notices. Under current law, townships are required to publish public notices in newspapers. House Bill 315 would add two new options:

1. publishing notices for free on the state's public notice website.
2. publishing notices on a township's website and social media accounts.

On behalf of the *Enquirer* and other Gannett-owned publications across Ohio, I respectfully urge the committee to remove these provisions. **Why?**

**They are impractical** – impossible, in fact – to execute for both newspapers and townships.

**First** – the “public notice website” is not a government-owned platform. It is operated by the newspaper association to aggregate notices published in newspapers and their digital platforms. There is no direct access for government to use it. And because it is privately owned, the government cannot dictate the service be provide free of charge.

**Second** – the option to “publish notices on a township's website” provides no details. Where on the website? For how long does it stay active? Does it need to be archived?

**Third** – we know that public notices distributed via newspaper ensures access and distribution.

We ask that you remove these problematic provisions as we continue to work on a solution to modernize and standardize public notices across all levels of government, ensuring both transparency and public access.

You'll hear more from Ohio News Media Association director Monica Nieporte, but I'd like to make THREE quick points:

**FIRST, Government Should Not be Noticing Itself**

Public notice laws exist to promote government transparency, accountability, and public engagement. These laws serve as a check on government power by ensuring the public is

informed about critical matters like taxpayer-funded projects or property seizures. Provisions like those in House Bill 315 undermine this principle by allowing governments to publish notices on their own platforms.

When governments "report on themselves," significant accountability issues arise. For example:

- **Transparency risks:** There's no guarantee that notices will remain accessible or visible for an adequate amount of time.
- **AND, Potential conflicts of interest:** Governments could obscure or downplay information they prefer the public not see, or favor certain individuals in awarding contracts.

By preserving the longstanding process that newspapers—independent, third-party entities—publish public notices, we uphold an appropriate standard of transparency.

### **SECOND: Newspapers Reach More People Than Ever**

A common misconception is that “no one reads newspapers anymore.” While it's true that traditional print readership has declined, the newspaper industry has evolved and newspapers like the *Cincinnati Enquirer* are reaching more people through digital platforms **than ever before.**

Here are some key facts:

- Gannett newspaper websites in Ohio attract **over 11 million monthly users.**
- In September 2024 alone, Gannett Ohio sites recorded over **69 million pageviews.**
- Public notices published in newspapers are also aggregated into a searchable, statewide database managed by the Ohio News Media Association, offering dynamic, 24/7 access to all Ohioans.

By contrast, government websites lack the reach and visibility of newspaper platforms. They simply cannot match the level of public access and engagement that newspapers provide. Moreover, local government websites are not uniform, so Ohioans would not necessarily know where to find the notices on the over 1300 township and nearly 1000 different municipality websites.

**THIRD, Newspapers offer a cost-effective and efficient way to ensure public notices are widely distributed.** That is why newspapers remain the primary vehicle for public notice in all 50 states. By leveraging both print and digital platforms, we can maximize transparency and accessibility while minimizing costs for taxpayers.

But the changes proposed in House Bill 315 would reduce transparency, diminish public access, and weaken government accountability. Public notices belong in newspapers, where they are handled by an independent third party with the resources and reach to ensure they are seen by as many people as possible.

Thank you for considering my testimony. I welcome any questions from the committee.