**Note: To download a high-resolution photo of David M. Sanko, log onto www.psats.org and click on “Newsroom.”**

**For more information, contact Digital Communications Manager Jill Ercolino at (717) 763-0930, Ext. 125, or jercolino@psats.org.**

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**Online Legal Notices: Why Not?**

**An Op-Ed**

**by David M. Sanko**

Executive Director, Pa. State Association of Township Supervisors

Back in the Sixties, Bob Dylan sang that “the times they are a-changin.’”

How right he was.

Still, no one could have imagined the impact that technology and the Internet would have on our lives. We live in a world – almost unthinkable 50 years ago – where news and so much other information are at our fingertips, and we can access it whenever and wherever we want.

Consider this: Last year, the Pew Research Center reported that most Americans prefer to get their news on a screen, whether it’s from a website or a social media app. In fact, Pew researchers say, just two in 10 U.S. adults get their news from print newspapers, a 23-percent decrease from 2013.

Is it any surprise then that newspapers are shuttering at an alarming rate, opting to publish less often, or moving operations entirely online to preserve their bottom line and readership?

Meanwhile, technology has had an impact on townships, too.

A growing number of our members not only have websites but also Facebook and Twitter accounts to ensure that residents of all ages have access to information about their community in the format that’s most convenient for them.

This municipal march toward openness, transparency, and accessibility, however, is being stifled by an outdated law that still requires townships, school districts, and other local governments to publish costly public notices, often referred to as legal ads, in the local newspaper *(that is, if one still exists in the community).* These notices appear in the newspaper’s classifieds section and announce such things as meeting dates, ordinances and resolutions, bid requests, and budgets.

We wonder, though, is publishing legal notices in a newspaper of general circulation the most effective way to deliver this information to residents and conduct public business? And there’s another problem: This antiquated mandate is costing Pennsylvania taxpayers more than $26 million a year in legal advertising fees, Penn State researchers report.

New legislation, sponsored by Sen. John Eichelberger, a Blair County Republican, would offer a fix.

Senate Bill 745 would create a statewide public notice database, overseen by the state’s no-nonsense government watchdog, the Office of Open Records. Under this system, your community would be able to post its legal ads in a searchable database that’s accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This new, more open and efficient approach would not only save taxpayer dollars but also give the public what it’s come to expect and demand: instant access to information.

No more wasting time searching through back issues of the newspaper to find a legal notice buried in the classified section. And no more hoping you didn’t miss something important if you missed that day’s newspaper.

SB 745 includes other transparency protections for Pennsylvanians, too.

Municipalities would be required to provide copies of all public notices at their office, post them on their website for an extended period, and send the legal ads to the local newspaper, which could publish them as a public service, much like they notify readers about other important community events.

Also, SB 745 doesn’t stop municipalities from continuing to put paid legal notices in the local newspaper, if they choose.

How much fairer can a law get?

Look, I realize change isn’t easy, and I can certainly understand why newspapers would want to hold onto every bit of revenue, especially as more and more readers reject print publications in favor of news websites and social media.

But all of us have had to adapt to this new age of instantaneous information. We also must look beyond our own self-interests and focus on what’s best for our customers and constituents.

SB 745 is a common-sense reform that will save taxpayers millions of dollars a year. In a budget climate where every penny counts, it only makes sense to provide local leaders, the stewards of that money, with cost-effective options for posting public notices while promoting government transparency and openness.

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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, home to 5.5 million Pennsylvanians.