

Newspaper Publication Costs Report



Submitted to Syracuse Common Council

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Introduction

Per Section 3-109 of the City Charter, the Syracuse Post-Standard is the City of Syracuse's designated official newspaper and is the only daily newspaper of general circulation serving the Syracuse area. The City of Syracuse is required under various provisions of state law, the city charter, and other city ordinances to provide notifications to the general public about many of its activities. Examples of activities currently subject to public notification requirements include:

- Publication of the city/school district budgets,
- Public hearings on approved local laws,
- Listing of tax delinquent properties in the city and county,
- Public auctions of surplus materials and equipment, and
- Procurement opportunities for vendors

The City currently complies with its requirements by placing legal notices and classified advertisements in its official newspaper. The costs of providing public notifications through the official newspaper are expensive. For instance, in fiscal year 2010 to 2011, the City of Syracuse paid \$215,554.59 to the Syracuse Post-Standard for a combination of legal notices, classified advertisements, and subscriptions. The largest cost was incurred by the City's Finance Department, which is required to publish detailed listings of approximately 5,200 tax delinquent properties four times each year. The cost of these notices exceeded \$163,000.

It is the City Auditor's hope that this report will guide in reducing the financial burdens and make the city notifications more readily accessible to the public.

Objective

Our objective is to illustrate the high costs of providing public notifications and offer alternatives to reduce some of the financial strains on the City of Syracuse and its taxpayers.

Scope

Our examination consisted of reviewing each city departments invoices for legal notices, classified advertisements, and subscriptions from fiscal year 2010 to 2011. Aversion of this report is included.

Analysis

The City of Syracuse of working under public notice laws that were enacted decades ago, when the traditional print media had a monopoly on the dissemination of written records.

Technological advances over the last twenty years have made these laws outdated. The widespread availability of web publishing tools and access to the internet now offer a more cost effective way of providing information about local government operations to the general public.

Indeed, municipal governments, including the City of Syracuse, have for years been self-publishing such information on their own websites. For example, since 2002, the City has published and archived its entire line item city and school budget on its web page at a nominal cost. Yet, for fiscal year 2010 to 2011, the City paid the Post-Standard \$9,562 for a one time printing of a condensed version that many find difficult to read.

Newspapers across the country have acknowledged that digital delivery rather than print delivery is the wave of the future. In fact, as of February 4th 2013, current Post-Standard subscribers in Syracuse and Onondaga County have seen the home delivery of their newspaper decreased to three days per week. The reduced home delivery schedule has been supplemented by a new daily online edition. Additionally, legal notices will only be accepted three days per week for publication as compared to the previous seven day schedule. However, legal notices will not appear in the print or online editions produced on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays.

In an environment, where mostly everyone is receiving their information digitally and the City's official newspaper has significantly downgraded the content and availability of its printed product, mandating that local governments use traditional print media to communicate with their constituencies is ineffective.

Recommendations

1. The Mayor and the Common Council should formally request that the State Senate, Assembly, and Governor amend state laws governing public notification requirements to allow web based alternatives to print publication. For example, effective March 1, 2013, The Department of Homeland Security authorized the U.S. Customs & Border Protection and Immigration & Customs Enforcement to advertise legal notices of seizure property pending forfeiture on the Department of Justice's website as the primary method to notify the public.
2. The Mayor and the Common Council should request that the City Law Department determine if there are public notification provisions in the City Charter or Ordinances that may be amended in a similar manner through local legislative action.
3. If State or local officials declare that print publication is still necessary, then relevant laws should be amended to allow that newspaper legal notices simply refer readers to a local government's website for detailed information instead of requiring full publication of lengthy and costly documents.

4. The Administration should also self-publish on the City's website all legal notices and classified advertisements now submitted to the official newspaper to provide an additional point of access to the public. Furthermore, all notices should be accessible by displaying a prominent link on the website's home page, rather than buried within the web pages of each city department.
5. The Administration should conduct a review of the number of subscriptions ordered by city departments to determine if all are necessary for city business.