City of New Britain

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Testimony of Phil Sherwood
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In Opposition of HB 5031-AAC Reducing Costs to Municipalities
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Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Sharkey and other members of the Planning and Development Committee. My name is Phil Sherwood and I am testifying today in my capacity as Majority Leader of the New Britain City Council. I appreciate having the opportunity to express concerns with HB 5031, AAC Reducing Costs to Municipalities.

It is my opinion that we need to be ensuring a higher level of transparency than is currently required by law. Unfortunately, HB 5031 moves in the opposite direction and instead undermines transparency in local government.

For decades public notices have been required for both private and public projects, public business associated with zoning, board of finance, planning commission, changes in ordinances and regulations, lists of unclaimed property, vital information regarding elections and dates that local taxes are due. Without an accessible public notice process, citizen's risk losing their opportunity to know how public policy is affecting their local community, and by extension, their ability to change the outcome of public policy is diminished.

While some may see that individuals are using the web to access information in an increasingly rapid pace and that the world is very different place than it was 20 years ago, I do not feel that posting notices on a website of a town or municipality accomplishes the same fundamental functions of having a notice printed in a local newspaper. Those who prefer to view public notices electronically can already do so as the Connecticut Daily Newspapers Association already posts all daily newspaper public notice ads, free of charge, which is searchable, in addition to what they currently print. It certainly would be a positive addition of towns and cities posted them as well.

Newspapers are viewed more than any municipal website but, more importantly, newspapers provide an independent, third-party paper-trail verification that notices were published properly and in accordance with the law. Allowing government agencies to control and self regulate by posting notices on the internet themselves would remove this vital independent verification. Government controlled notice programs simply wouldn't accomplish the same thing as printed newspaper notices. Allowing towns to post public notices on their local websites would be tantamount to hiding from the public the information contained in these notices. It is important to note that internet sites are not easily archived or verifiable, especially in regards to the posting dates of notices, allowing the notices easily access to be tampered with. HB 5031 would create confusion, interfere with public participation and create an open invitation for abuse.

In some cases the city of New Britain already posts some of the notices on the city website. We should do it even more but it should not be in lieu of public notices in print media. I have never received a call from a constituent inquiring about a public matter because of

something they saw on the city website. I do, however, receive numerous calls about items that are seen in the paper.

Print media captures passive users, whether it is someone looking for last nights winning lotto numbers or looking to see if Coach Calhoun will be returning to UCONN next season. Print media casts a wider net, and until that changes, public notices should continue to be posted in local newspapers.

Municipalities are desperate for revenue and for ideas that save taxpayer money. Both state and cities have been forced to make tough and painful decisions because of the economic climate we face. Even small budget expenditures require scrutiny. I do not believe that limiting taxpayer access to important local information is the way to do it and believe it will harm local businesses as the action of removing public notices from the public view in print media could lead to the closing of local newspapers. Local newspapers such as the New Britain Herald and the Bristol Press are often the only affordable option for local small businesses to advertise and network.

It is my hope, that given the recent history of corruption, both at the state and local levels, that lawmakers sensitive to the public trust and who care about fundamental tenets of open and democratic government will let the HB 5031 and the concepts within it die.

Phil Sherwood, Majority Leader
New Britain City Council