

## Newspapers offer online public notices

Written by Elizabeth Barrett  
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LINCOLN—The Nebraska Press Association has unveiled a new free service for readers—free online access to public notices.

The system that is in operation allows Nebraskans to view the public notices online that local and state governments, attorneys and other entities publish in print in Nebraska newspapers.

In addition, users have the option to subscribe to alerts so they know when public notices of interest to them are published in Nebraska newspapers.

The online access site is named NEPublicNotices.com.

“We believe this is a valuable resource for citizens of the state who are looking for information contained in public notices,” said Kurt Johnson, past president of the Nebraska Press Association. “The alert functionality of the system, in particular, is a new feature that could prove very popular with certain users who regularly search for that type of information.”

Johnson led the development of NEPublicNotices.com during his term as NPA president.

Through the Nebraska Press Association and Nebraska Press Advertising Service boards’ partnership with Universal Information Services of Omaha, a process was developed that automatically extracts public notices from the digitized newspapers of Nebraska.

Todd Murphy, vice president at Universal, helped the NPA develop procedures that would efficiently automate the extraction of notices. The NPA/NPAS boards contracted with Lincoln-based Information Analytics to develop the public notices website.

The development began in October.

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NPA has a long association with Universal Information Services. It was Universal that helped the NPA design and implement the Nebraska News Link, which displays word-searchable digitized images of Nebraska newspapers.

In recent years, Universal and the NPA have contracted with Information Analytics to help create the Nebraska News Link site so readers can access the digitized newspapers.

Because the pages are digitally scanned by Universal, readers can use keyword searches to find content they are looking for.

Information Analytics also was an NPA partner in the creation of Nebraska News Link.

Much of the same digital word-searchable technology is being used with NEPublicNotices.com.

Nebraskans now are able to find important public notices, including notices and minutes from public meetings, legal announcements and calls for bids on publicly funded projects.

NEPublicNotices.com continues a process for newspapers to provide free online access that began in 2011 after Nebraska lawmakers debated several measures that would have legalized online publication of public notices.

Nebraska newspapers and some other interested trade and professional associations strongly opposed the online public notice proposals, which were killed or stalled during the legislative session.

However, at least one proposal surfaced in the 2012 legislative session, but Nebraska newspaper leaders were determined to retain public notices in the state's 178 weekly and daily publications, and the 2012 legislative proposal failed to advance.

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Nebraska newspapers are providing the free online notices so the state can avoid the expense of creating and maintaining its own public notice system online.

“Carrying out the traditional ‘fourth estate’ role as a government watchdog, newspapers serve as a valuable resource for public information,” Johnson said. “Having notices appear in print is significant because it creates a published document that can be verified, but then taking the next step and creating an online format for that information eliminates any need for a political entity to duplicate those services.”

Johnson added, “With the help of Universal Information Services, we’re proud to be able to offer this word-searchable archive of public notices. We believe newspapers are the proper vehicle to provide that information.”

Today, the law recognizes only notices published in legally designated newspapers. Under Nebraska law, newspapers work with governing entities and other sources to publish public notices and provide sworn affidavits that the notices have appeared in print.

The work by Information Analytics comes after the NPA and NPAS boards encouraged all Nebraska newspapers to become enrolled in Nebraska News Link so their public notices can appear online along with the notices published in Nebraska’s other newspapers.

Currently, most Nebraska newspapers already make their public notices available online or are members of Nebraska News Link and have their notices available in PDF or digitally scanned formats.

Newspapers that are not members of Nebraska News Link or do not have content available online constitute about 0.05% of the state’s paid newspaper subscribers, according to Allen Beermann, executive director of NPA/NPAS.

By consolidating printed notices in a single website, NEPublicNotices.com makes it easier for

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Nebraskans to find and use notices.

“This really is a user-friendly system designed to provide quick and easy access to vital information,” Johnson said. “Whether you live in Scottsbluff, Omaha or somewhere in between, citizens now are able to access a broader scope of information much easier than they could before.”