



**Maryland | Delaware | DC Press Association**

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To: Judiciary Committee

From: Rebecca Snyder, Executive Director, MDDC Press Association

Date: February 10, 2025

Re: **OPPOSE HB 623**

The Maryland-Delaware-District of Columbia Press Association represents a diverse membership of news media organizations, from large metro dailies like the Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun, to hometown newspapers such as The Annapolis Capital and the Maryland Gazette to publications such as The Daily Record, the Baltimore Times, and online-only publications such as Maryland Matters and Baltimore Brew. Our members are central pillars of their communities, providing not only news and information that is critical to the public, but jobs and other economic contributions. The majority of our members are small businesses, defined as fewer than 50 employees. The Local News Ecosystem report (published April 2024) from the University of Maryland shared that 90% of the news outlets they surveyed had news staff numbering fewer than 20 people. Every jurisdiction in Maryland has a local newspaper, with a digital presence, where notices are cross published. The press association aggregates all notices from member publications in a website available to all.

The Press Association strongly opposes HB 623, which seeks to centralize estate notices on a government-operated website alone, effectively pulling critical information for creditors and heirs into a subject specific website that requires a user to have reliable internet access AND to know where to look for the information. This would upend the longstanding practice of publishing public notices in local newspapers and their associated websites, threatening the vitality of Maryland's communities and the essential role of the press in fostering civic engagement and accountability. This bill will also remove a vital revenue stream for local newspapers, jeopardizing the future of journalism in our state. **We believe that HB 623 will create a seismic change in the local media landscape that will decimate and potentially prompt the closure of local news outlets.**

For decades, local news media has been at the core of their communities, providing critical information, facilitating public discourse, and holding power to account. Although digital formats now supplement print publications, the watchdog role of news media has remained constant. Public notices, a cornerstone of transparency and accountability in government through independent publication and a deep reach into local communities, have been a fundamental part of this ecosystem. Cataclysmic change sounds dramatic. Local news, however, is on the precipice. **HB 623 will abandon a system of public notice that has worked well for decades and eliminate a significant number of jobs in Maryland.** Local news will go away if communities, governments and others do not support it. Studies show that when a community loses its source of local news, it experiences decreased voter turnout and civic engagement; increased municipal borrowing costs that lead to higher taxes; and decreased transparency among government and business officials, leading to increased waste, fraud, and abuse.

We believe the **effect of this legislation will be to take \$3.5 million directly out of news media and local reporting**. Some publications may merge with others; some may go out of business. When Governor Moore **vetoed this same legislation in May 2024**, he understood the economic pressures facing the industry. Our members wrote to him at that time with these remarks:

- “Losing this absolutely will cost jobs. As in all industries, newspapers – and media companies more generally – operate within certain cost structures to maintain viability. A foundational metric is payroll as a percent of revenue. Carefully run traditional newspapers keep payroll to about 30 percent of revenue. Realistically, many papers now are moving closer to 33 or 35 percent, or even higher, with many papers that prioritize quality reporting operating at the higher end. For very digitally oriented media companies, which don’t have the same production and delivery expenses to bear, payroll might come in at a higher percent of revenue. But I suspect that most publishers that receive legal advertising (and still generate the vast majority of reporting in Maryland) would likely be guided by a 30 to 35 percent benchmark. From that, you can easily do the math to see that this kind of a revenue blow will affect employment.” In my operation, these notices account for about \$250,000 each year. A third of \$250,000 is \$82,500. That’s two positions we would likely need to eliminate. That almost certainly reduces our newsroom staffing by at least one position.”
- “My operation will be forced to implement a number of drastic cost reduction efforts should HB 1258 become law. The most likely scenario I see at this point is reducing our workforce by 7 - 10 positions (5-6 reporters | 2-4 business / OPS). This will represent roughly one quarter of our newsroom staff across all sites, and will force a number of other changes in coverage which could include frequency of print publication, closing free-access publications or elimination or merging of titles because of revenue that will be lost from the company as a whole.”
- “I am not sure I can stay in business if this becomes law. We are extremely small and this is critical revenue for us. We are the only print publication in our county as it is.”
- “Our newspaper would not “close,” but would potentially publish less frequently and possibility become digital only - with an older audience. Older audiences are well known to be less digitally savvy and prefer print. A minimum of three (3) salaries would need to be eliminated to make up for the LOSS of substantial revenue.”
- “If this goes through, we will lose at least 2 people one part time and one full time.”
- “In our publication, estate notices average about \$20k a year which is 1/2 of one reporter’s total compensation.”

Proponents of HB623 argue that centralizing public notices on a government website will increase accessibility and efficiency for the state Register of Wills offices. However, this overlooks the reality that many residents, particularly in underserved communities, lack reliable internet access or the technological literacy to navigate online platforms effectively. Many pandemic-era subsidies that made broadband access affordable for Marylanders have been discontinued. Websites are hacked regularly and government is not immune. **The print publication is a tangible, permanent record that is archived by publications and libraries, containing the records of an entire community.** Having these notices appear only on a court website diminishes the independence of notice as the agency placing the notice is the one that is publishing the notice. **News media is in the business of audience development and dissemination of information, and the traffic to both member websites and the MDDCNews.com aggregated site dwarfs a state website.** Having notices in the context of other news and information the public searches for make notices more visible. That will not happen under this bill.

We urge an unfavorable report.

Luke Clippinger, Chair  
Maryland House of Delegates Judiciary Committee  
6 Bladen Street  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Dear Mr. Clippinger and Maryland House of Delegates Judiciary Committee:

I serve as Regional President for Adams Publishing Group – Chesapeake, overseeing twelve publications that will be directly impacted by House Bill 623. The enactment of this law will impose hundreds of thousands of dollars of negative financial impact on our operations, lead to job losses, and potentially force the closure of media properties—outcomes that will reverberate throughout the Maryland economy.

This impact comes at a time when media properties along the East Coast are already grappling with the detrimental effects of the proposed 25% Canadian tariffs introduced by the new Trump administration. Local Maryland print publications are facing not only soaring costs for Canadian newsprint but also a significant loss of revenue due to HB623.

Moreover, with a minimum of 24 publications of record—covering every county, including Baltimore City—the compounded loss of revenue and increased operating costs threaten hundreds of jobs. As more Marylanders find themselves out of work, the economic strain on our communities will intensify. Please do not jeopardize the financial stability of Maryland’s media industry and, by extension, our local economy.

It is important to note that the service this bill seeks to replicate is already provided free of charge by the Maryland/DC/Delaware Press Association. Allowing an independent body to oversee public notices not only is an efficient service but also instills public confidence through third-party oversight of the public sector.

I strongly urge you and your committee members to issue an unfavorable report for HB623.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,



Orestes Baez  
Regional President  
Adams Publishing Group – Chesapeake



February 10, 2025

To: Judiciary Committee

**RE: House Bill 623's decimating effects on local media – letter of opposition**

Dear Judiciary Committee,

The Baltimore Sun is the primary source of news and information in this region, catering to over 800k readers weekly. Collectively, our products reach approximately eight out of 10 households in the market, providing our readers with timely access to news, information, and public notices.

We respectfully oppose House Bill 623, a bill intended to move all public notices from every State of Maryland Register of Wills office to a centralized website operated and managed by the Register of Wills. Under current law, the Register of Wills and representatives are required to publish notices in a newspaper of general circulation for a certain amount of time, providing notice to creditors for any outstanding debt owed by the decedent and notice of death to the heirs of the decedent.

House Bill 623 was drafted without any input from local newspapers in the State of Maryland, including Baltimore Sun Media, publisher of The Baltimore Sun, Capital Gazette, Carroll County Times, The Aegis, and Howard County Times, all of which provide timely access to public notices. As you know, Baltimore Sun Media was purchased by Maryland owners in early 2024, bringing local ownership to these newspapers for the first time in close to 40 years.

The proposed bill does not include a transition plan outlining how the general public will access these notices if they are no longer published in local newspapers. This is a key, missing element, as our readers have always relied on local newspapers for this information. Under the proposed bill, the register will transition to the new platform effective Oct. 1, 2025, without a plan to inform the general public of the change. This is a disservice to our readers and the communities we serve, all of which rely on their local newspapers for news and information, including legal notices.

Under House Bill 623, the Register of Wills website may post the notices at no cost; however, under this proposal, to access notices everyone in the community must have internet access and understand where to access the information.

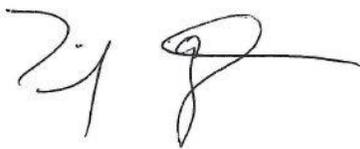
At this point, people are unaware of this database. Our readers, community members, and businesses have always relied on our products to access information related to estate notices. To provide some context, at the last reported time the Register of Wills website averages 9,000 page views per month, Baltimoresun.com averages 21,147,884 page views per month. (Source: July-Dec 2024 Google Analytics) Notices should be published where the general community looks for news and information and not just available through an online-only government database.

Baltimore Sun Media provides access to public notices in print and online through our e-Newspaper edition, and all of our notices are aggregated on the MDDC website, which provides free access to the public. The Register of Wills is proposing to replicate what has always been a part of the industry's commitment to public notices.

We respectfully oppose House Bill 623. Please do not let House Bill 623 pass into law to limit public notice information to citizens.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions about my comments above.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trif Alatzas', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Trif Alatzas  
Publisher and Editor-in-Chief  
The Baltimore Sun