

The Three R's of Public Notice

Important news hidden in plain sight

Many reporters think of the public notices (aka legal notices) that run in their newspapers as advertising. But they're really news. News about official actions so important the law compels public officials and corporate officers to reveal them. They're a vitally important, fundamental requirement of governmental and corporate public disclosure.

But some notices disclose only the bare minimum required by law. A notice of a "special meeting" for "general purposes", for instance, should raise a red flag. Although the notice may be legally sufficient, it reveals little. Which is where a reporter comes in. To make the phone call. To ask why the notice couldn't say more. To report on what it's really about.

Here are recent examples of award-winning stories uncovered by reporters who delved below the surface of a public notice that ran in their paper.

- **Reporter & Farmer (Webster, S.D.):** City financial officer may have embezzled as much as \$72,000
- **Greeneville (Tenn.) Sun:** Health and Human Services Dept. closes nursing home as a result of deficiencies
- **Mitchell (S.D.) Daily Republic:** School district secretly pays "going-away" bonus to unsatisfactory superintendent
- **Farmington (N.M.) Daily News:** New sewage permit planned for RV park
- **Scranton (Pa.) Times-Tribune:** 12-story cell tower coming to local park
- **Monroe County (Ga.) Reporter:** Schools seizing private landowner's property for an arts center

Remember the three R's to report on the public notices in your paper:

- 1 READ** the notices that are right under your nose. Religiously. Every day. Once you do that, you undoubtedly will want to ...
- 2 REPORT** on the news contained there. A no-brainer, right? But don't forget to ...
- 3 REFERENCE** the notice in your story. It's an official record; cite it as a source. Tell your readers when and where it ran.

This flyer was prepared by the Public Notice Resource Center, a nonprofit organization providing education and research about public notice.

For more information, contact admin@pnrc.net.

