

Legal notices get your readers talking (with you and each other)

The week of October 15th, the *Kansas City Star*, along with many other newspapers in the state, ran the legal notice from the Missouri Secretary of State's office containing the language of the many initiatives that will be presented on the ballot in November. Then, in Sunday's letters to the editor section on the editorial page, a letter appeared from a reader of the paper in Parkville.

He noted that he had read all the proposals on the three marijuana initiatives. It was a thoughtful letter, pointing out various differences between the proposals. It discussed the issue of what will happen if more than one marijuana initiative passes. And he chose one he advocated for personally.

The *Star's* legal notice ran eleven pages, which included more than the three initiatives he discussed. But because he was interested in its content, he read a large part of it. Because it was about a matter of importance to him, he read a large part of it. And as a result of what he found there, he was motivated enough to write a letter to tell other readers his thoughts.

It was an important part of his newspaper on that day.

Legal notices have a rich history. The concept of public notices began long before newspapers existed, according to research from the Public Notice Re-

source Center (PNRC), which points to posted notices in public squares as the first such notices.

The first English newspaper, published in 1665, contained notices from the King's Court. "While state governments had been publishing public notices in newspapers throughout colonial times, it was not long before the newly-created federal government followed suit. In 1789, the Acts of the First Session of the Congress required all bills, orders, resolutions and congressional votes be published in at least three publicly available newspapers," the PNRC details in the history of legal notices contained on its website, www.pnrc.net.

It's a vital part of each newspaper. Readers of legal notices are seeking important information. Not only are ballot initiatives there, but so are notices about real estate sales. Notices about sales of personal property and notices that individuals may have lost track of some of their personal property that is subject to such sale can be important to readers. Notices of court matters, such as guardianships and deaths of persons, alert potential creditors. Notices of closed banks, proposals to close some roads – there's a wide variety of public information that can be found in legal notices.

And Missouri courts have a history

of recognizing the importance of legal notices. For example, a reference to "public notices" regarding a corporate matter can be found in a case that was decided in 1885. In 1897, a court pointed out that the general public is entitled to notice about a certain matter in the case that was pending before it. And in 1892, another case noticed that the owner of hogs running loose on city streets would be given notice "by one week's publication in some newspaper of general circulation in the city." Nobody likes hogs running loose on city streets.

"It is the purpose of legal notices and advertisements to give notice of legal and public events and proceedings," a judge confirmed in a 1980 case. Speaking specifically about Section 493.050, R.S.Mo., that judge noted, "We think it may be reasonably deduced that the primary and basic purpose of the act is to require publication in a 'going' regularly published and well-established newspaper. This, upon the theory that, by reason of long establishment of the newspaper in which it is published, the notice will more likely come to the attention of a greater number of citizens in the county."

"The goal of the statute is to give notice to the widest audience possible. In order to ensure that each newspaper that publishes these notices can reach the entire audience, the statute mandates the duration and circulation requirements," another judge in a 2000 decision said, speaking of Section 493.050.

Missouri legal notices have a strong foundation. Thanks to all of you who work so hard to support this effort and to focus your readers on the importance of such notices in their everyday lives.

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