



TOWN OF WESTFORD
TOWN MANAGER

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To: Westford Select Board
From: Kristen Las, Town Manager
CC: Angela Harkness, Town Moderator
Date: February 11, 2026
Re: Article 20 - Digital Publication of Legal Notices

The purpose of this memorandum is to explain the rationale for the warrant article authorizing the Select Board, on behalf of the Town, to petition the General Court for passage of a special act allowing the Town of Westford to publish legal notices in digital, “print-free” formats.

Background

Under current Massachusetts law, most legal notices issued by municipalities must be published in a printed newspaper of general circulation. While newspapers now commonly maintain digital platforms, the statutory requirement for print publication remains in place for many notices, regardless of cost, readership, or actual public access.

Over time, this requirement has become increasingly misaligned with how residents receive information. Print newspaper circulation has declined significantly, while residents rely primarily on online sources for local news, official notices, and public information.

Purpose of the Petition

The proposed special act would provide Westford with flexibility — not a mandate — to satisfy legal notice requirements through digital publication. Specifically, the act would allow the Town to publish legal notices using one or more of the following methods:

- A traditional print newspaper
- A newspaper’s website
- Qualified local digital news websites
- A statewide digital repository for legal notices
- A Town-maintained website serving as a legal notice repository

Importantly, the legislation does not eliminate print publication as an option; it simply allows the Town to choose the most effective and accessible method for each notice.

Massachusetts Municipal Precedent

Westford’s proposed petition is consistent with those of other Massachusetts municipalities, including Arlington, Lexington, and Lincoln which have already been approved by the General

Court. Additionally, the communities of Wellesley, Newton, Plymouth, and North Brookfield have similar home rule petitions pending before the General Court.

These examples demonstrate that the Legislature has already accepted this approach, and that Westford is following a well-established and successful model.

Benefits to the Town

This flexibility would provide several benefits:

- **Improved public access:** Residents are far more likely to see notices online than in print newspapers. Digital publication increases visibility and transparency.
- **Cost efficiency:** Legal advertising costs have risen substantially. Digital publication offers the potential for meaningful savings over time without reducing notice requirements. In FY24 and FY25, the Town spent about \$20,000 per year on legal notices for the newspaper. Residents and businesses would realize similar savings.
- **Modernization:** The petition reflects current communication practices while maintaining compliance with statutory notice timelines and requirements.
- **Local control:** Decisions about how and where to publish notices would be made locally, based on what best serves the community.

Safeguards

The proposed act includes important protections:

- It does not change any statutory requirements regarding the timing or duration of legal notices.
- It allows the Legislature to make only clerical or editorial changes unless approved by the Select Board.

Why a Special Act Is Required

Because legal notice requirements are established in state law, Westford cannot make this change unilaterally. Authorization from the General Court through a special act is required to allow the Town this flexibility.

Conclusion

This warrant article seeks authorization to pursue a modern, flexible, and transparent approach to legal notices that reflects how residents access information today, while maintaining all statutory safeguards for public notice. A favorable vote does not require the Town to eliminate print notices; it simply enables Westford to choose the most effective publication method going forward.