

Legal Q&A

By Christy Drake-Adams, TML Legal Counsel

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Must a city designate an official newspaper?

State law requires that at the beginning of the fiscal year the city council of a Type A city designate its official newspaper by resolution or ordinance and contract with that paper to publish required notices. TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 52.004(a). Each ordinance, notice, and any other matter required by law or ordinance to be published must be published in the official paper regardless of where else it is published. *Id.* § 52.004(b).

These requirements are not expressly provided in state law for other types of general law cities. However, they arguably apply because of the “borrowing provisions.” Specifically, Type B cities have the same duties as a Type A city, unless there is a conflicting state provision regarding only Type B cities. *Id.* § 51.035. And, depending on its population, a Type C city has either the same duties as a Type B city or a Type A city. *Id.* § 51.051.

State law also seems to anticipate that a home rule city designate an official newspaper. *See id.* § 52.013(b) (“If the charter . . . does not provide for the method of publication of an ordinance, the full text of the ordinance or a caption that summarizes the purpose of the ordinance and the penalty for violating the ordinance may be published at least twice in the municipality’s official newspaper.”). In some cities, the charter actually “name[s] the official newspaper in which to publish the official city notices.” TERRELL BLODGETT, TEXAS HOME RULE CHARTERS 93 (2d. ed. 2010). Any details regarding the designation, such as the timing and form of designation, are found in the city’s charter as well.

Must a city seek competitive bids or proposals in designating its official newspaper?

Maybe. With certain exceptions, a city is required to following the bidding or proposal procedures outlined in Local Government Code Chapter 252 when it plans to make an expenditure of more than \$50,000 in city funds. TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 252.021(a)-(b); *id.* § 252.022(a)(16) (providing that Chapter 252 does not apply to an expenditure for advertising, other than legal notices). An informal survey conducted by the Texas Municipal League in 2012 indicates that only the largest cities (500,000+ population) reach this \$50,000 spending threshold for newspaper publications. However, it is important to note that a city may impose on itself a lower dollar threshold and, in that way, trigger the need to competitively bid for an official newspaper.

What criteria must a newspaper meet in order to qualify as the official newspaper?

While there is some dispute among attorneys as to the exact requirements that apply in designating an official newspaper, a city using the criteria in Government Code Sections 2051.044 and 2051.048 is on strong legal footing. Section 2051.044 provides that a newspaper used to convey official notices must as a general matter:

- (1) devote not less than 25 percent of its total column lineage to general interest items;
- (2) be published at least once each week;
- (3) be entered as second-class postal matter in the county where published; and
- (4) have been published regularly and continuously for at least 12 months before the governmental entity or representative publishes notice.

TEX. GOV'T CODE § 2051.044(a).

Section 2051.048 provides that a notice published by a city must, as a general matter, be published in a newspaper:

- (1) that is published in the city; and
- (2) that will publish the notice at or below the legal rate.

Id. § 2051.048(b). (Note: Section 2051.048 provides alternative requirements when no newspaper is published in the city at the specified rate. *Id.* § 2051.048(c)-(d).)

A home rule city must also look to its charter for any additional criteria. *See, e.g., State ex rel. Winn v. City of San Antonio*, 259 S.W.2d 248, 251-52 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1953, writ ref'd n.r.e.) (discussing a charter provision that required publication in a “daily newspaper”).

Has a city’s designation of a particular newspaper as its “official newspaper” ever been challenged?

Yes. From time to time, we hear from cities that receive threatening letters from a newspaper claiming that the city has not complied with the law in its designation of an official newspaper. This often arises when a city is located in more than one county, and has multiple papers to choose from, or when a city is changing its official newspaper. Some newspapers have actually sued cities in conjunction with the designation of an official newspaper. *See, e.g., Forney Messenger, Inc. v. Tennon*, 959 F.Supp. 389, 390 (N.D. Tex. 1997) (alleging that city officials conducted a sham bidding process and then voted to switch all city advertising to a different newspaper in violation of the Open Meetings Act).

Is an “official newspaper” the same thing as a newspaper of “general circulation”?

No, not necessarily. The attorney general has opined that a newspaper of general circulation is one that: (1) has more than a de minimis number of subscribers within a specific geographic region; (2) has a diverse readership; and (3) publishes some items of general interest to the community. Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. JC-0223 (2000). Thus, if your city is acting under one of the many statutes that requires notice be published in a newspaper of general circulation, the newspaper must meet the three criteria set out above.

In addition, assuming the law under which the city is acting does not specify a contrary manner of publication, the attorney general has opined that a newspaper of general circulation must also meet the requirements of an official newspaper. *Id.* (discussing county publications and concluding that “a newspaper of general circulation must be a newspaper for the purposes of

section 2051.044, in addition to having more than a de minimis number of subscribers and a diverse subscribership”).

What could happen if a city is required, but fails, to use a newspaper of general circulation?

A city that takes an action for which notice must be published in a newspaper of general circulation is subject to having that action challenged if a proper newspaper is not used. *See, e.g., Christy v. Williams*, 292 S.W.2d 348, 350-51 (Tex. Civ. App.—Galveston 1956, writ dismissed)(challenging a bond election notice because the paper was not entered as a second class postal matter); Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0380 (2005) (discussing possible consequences of county’s failure to use a newspaper of general circulation).

How much should a newspaper charge your city to publish a notice?

Section 2051.045 of the Government Code provides that the legal rate for publication of a notice in a newspaper by a governmental entity is the newspaper’s lowest published rate for classified advertising.

If no newspaper published in either the city or the county in which the city is located will publish the notice at or below this legal rate, a city should post the notice at the door of the county courthouse in the court in which the city is located. TEX. GOV’T CODE § 2051.048(d); *see also* Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0856 (2011).

Where is a newspaper published?

The attorney general has opined that, under Texas law, the location of publication is where the newspaper is released to the public. Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. GA-0838 (2011) (citing *Christy v. Williams*, 292 S.W.2d 348, 352 (Tex. Civ. App.—Galveston 1956, writ dismissed) and Tex. Att’y Gen. Op. No. O-7112 (1946)).

Which state statutes require a city to publish notice in the newspaper?

A noncomprehensive review of the state law identified over 100 statutes that require cities to publish some type of notice in a newspaper. Many statutes require publication of the same notice multiple times. Following are some of the most common situations in which state law requires a city to publish a notice in a newspaper:

- Adopting an Ordinance. *See, e.g.,* TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE §§ 52.011-.013.
- Holding an Election. *See, e.g.,* TEX. ELEC. CODE § 4.003, TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE §9.004 (charter amendment).
- Conducting a Hearing. *See, e.g.,* TEX. LOC. GOV’T CODE §§ 43.0561 (annexation), 102.0065 (budget), 211.006 (zoning).
- Making a Purchase. *See, e.g., id.* § 252.041.

What is one of the most common questions the attorneys at the League receive regarding newspaper notice?

One of the most frequent inquiries our attorneys receive in relation to newspaper notice is whether state law requires a city to advertise job openings in a newspaper. The answer is no. There is no law that requires a city to advertise every job opening in a newspaper. Nevertheless, one way to prevent having an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) discrimination complaint or lawsuit filed against the city is to sufficiently advertise job openings, which may include advertisement in a newspaper.

To avoid a discrimination claim, a city should advertise a job opening so that it reaches a large cross-section of the population. Federal, state, and sometimes local laws prohibit hiring practices that discriminate on the grounds of age, disability, race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, citizenship, military service and national origin. Thus, a city's hiring practice of merely advertising an opening to a certain geographic area, for example, may be used as evidence of discriminatory intent if a claim is filed against the city. For that reason, many cities choose to advertise job openings not only in a newspaper of general circulation, but in places like trade magazines and on the internet.

If your city does not have a hiring policy, including a policy regarding the advertisement of a job opening, you should seriously consider adopting one. Before advertising a job vacancy, the city should have a written job description in place that provides objective qualifications and responsibilities necessary to perform the job. The description should be devoid of any reference to sex, race, national origin, or any other protected class. In addition, a job description should include the essential functions of the position and other requirements, such as education, skills, and work experience. The job description should be used as a template for the job advertisement.

By taking the time to adopt a hiring policy, and to advertise a job opening to a wide range of people, your city: (1) increases its chance of hiring the best qualified person for the job; and (2) decreases the chance of facing a discrimination claim or lawsuit.