

Massachusetts House of Representatives

Bill Summary

Bill #:	H.5603
Title:	An Act allowing print-free digital legal notices for the town of Stow
Sponsor:	Rep. Kate Hogan
Committee:	Municipalities and Regional Government
Hearing Date:	9/21/26 to 9/28/26 written testimony only
Current Law:	MGL Chapter 4, section 13 (b) states “If a person, corporation, state agency, including its political subdivisions, a state authority, including its political subdivisions, municipality, including its political subdivisions, or other legal entity is required by a statute, ordinance, by-law or judicial order to publish a legal notice in a newspaper or newspaper of general circulation, the person, corporation, agency, authority, municipality or other legal entity shall publish said notice in a newspaper which shall ensure that the legal notice appears in: (i) a newspaper's print publication; (ii) on the newspaper's website; and (iii) on a statewide website that may be maintained as a repository for such notices; provided, however, that if a newspaper does not maintain its own website, publication on a statewide website and reference to the statewide website in the print publication notice shall satisfy the requirement of publication on the newspaper's website.” Subsection (c) of section 13 governs website operators and sets six criteria for digital publication: (i) continuous public access; (ii) full text of legal notices in a searchable format during the posting period; (iii) substantial compliance with accessibility standards; (iv) free viewing and search access, with a carveout permitting newspaper websites to charge for enhanced features; (v) a 90-day archive of legal notices after they come off the active page; and (vi) no website-publication fee in excess of the print-publication fee. Mass. General Laws Chapter 40A, Section 11 requires that public notices of public hearings be published in a newspaper of general circulation in the city or town for two weeks in a row, with the first publication occurring not less than 14 days before the hearing. The notice must also be posted in a conspicuous location in the city or town hall 14 days before the hearing.
Summary:	Section 1 exempts the town of Stow from any contrary provisions contained in Section 13 of MGL Chapter 4, by providing that whenever the town or its subdivisions, committees, boards, commissions or offices are required by statute, ordinance, by-law or judicial order to publish a legal notice in a

newspaper, such a requirement may be satisfied by posting or publishing the notice using 1 or more of the following methods:

- (a) in a print newspaper of local or general circulation;
- (b) on a newspaper website;
- (c) on a website that reports local news and opinion that satisfies all criteria for digital publication as enumerated in Section 13(c) of chapter 4;
- (d) on a statewide website maintained as a repository for such notices; or
- (e) on a town website that may be maintained as a repository for such notices.

Section 2 contains a provision stating that nothing in the act shall be construed to alter or amend the timing requirements for publishing legal notices as provided in the general laws.

Section 3 provides for this act to take effect upon its passage.

Notes:

The home rule petition language was approved as Article 46 at the May 9, 2026 Annual Town Meeting; declared passed by a nearly unanimous vote.

According to the Stow town administrator, this special legislation is required because a local newspaper ceased weekly print distribution as of January, 2026, and the town has struggled to find a print medium with sufficient readership and coverage to satisfy statutory legal notice requirements. As a stopgap measure, the town created a page on its website which permits residents to access legal notices.