

Blueprint points path forward for North Dakota's strained local newspapers

Strong public trust, willingness to support local journalism provides hope

BY MICHAEL STANDAERT

North Dakota News Cooperative

Shrinking profit margins, aging ownerships and headaches from factors beyond their control like postal delays continue to strain local newspapers across North Dakota.

While some of the 73 local newspapers in the state are in critical condition, the bigger picture is not one of dying out, but of hope for the future anchored by their importance to local communities.

A two-year effort to gather data called the Future of Local News Initiative, led by the North Dakota Newspaper Association and the Rural Development Finance Corporation, finds some reasons for optimism and several paths forward for journalism prosperity.

The effort, supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation, brought together journalists and publishers from across the state to gather a rare data set through surveying newspaper owners, journalists and consumers.

The group released a final report of their key findings on Jan. 29, with the data paving the way for pilot programs to address challenges going forward.

"This has been the most focused effort that the North Dakota Newspaper Association has ever done to quantify where we are at as an industry," said Cecile Wehrman, NDNA's executive director.

Trust in print

The data gathered includes finding that 9 out of 10 news consumers believe having a local newspaper is important, with a similar amount saying that los-

ing a paper harms local communities.

Newspapers are also the most trusted local news source, according to the data gathered by research partner Coda Ventures.

Chris Geselle, a development specialist with the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives Cooperative who was involved with the effort, said that struck him most about what the research found.

"People trust newspapers," Geselle said. "They view them as one of the more accurate media outlets or media forms out there."

Residents of the three counties where papers no longer exist - Sioux, Dunn and Slope - value papers even more, showing how those losses impact communities.

In those counties, 96% said having a newspaper is important, 87% said they would subscribe to a paper if it existed, and 21% said they would be willing to donate to help fund a newspaper beyond subscribing.

"The absence of papers is really noticed in those communities," Geselle said.

Joy Schoch, publisher of the Dickinson Press, a Forum Communications newspaper, said having data to back up the vital importance of newspapers has been an important outcome from the project.

"It's essential," she said. "It's essential to keep people informed. It makes a healthy community."

The next step in the effort is to pilot several solutions that tap into the deep reservoirs of trust, demand and opportunity while acknowledging the current

structural risks many newspapers face.

"This is a vital, trusted, necessary industry that people want and need, and we need to find a way collectively forward that benefits society," Wehrman said.

Translating the value

Currently, 24% of households across the state are reached by a newspaper, but looking deeper at county-level data shows much deeper penetration.

Out of 53 counties, 20 have over 75% of households receiving a local newspaper and 15 more show figures of between 50-75%.

Wehrman said those numbers more accurately reflect the impact newspapers have locally, and losing them means communities lose out.

With the \$199 million in federal Rural Health Transformation funding being rolled out in the coming year, the importance of local newspapers in communicating what programs are available and how the funding can be used in those communities is crucial, Wehrman said.

People need to understand newspapers are "not a public utility," she said. "These are individual businesses that need the support of their local communities in order to continue doing the work people value so highly."

That disconnect between valuing newspapers and being willing to support them through subscriptions or donations is something that needs to be tackled by both the newspapers themselves and the communities they serve if their survival is to continue.

"People aren't seeing news-

papers as a business like they see their hardware store as a business, and they may not be aware of their struggles," said Ellen Huber, rural development director for NDREC.

"We talk a lot about retaining and growing other kinds of businesses in the state, but I don't think anyone has thrown newspapers in that bucket of important, vital businesses, and ones that are worthy of focusing on, retaining and strengthening and growing," Huber said.

The real value of local newspapers needs to be better communicated to the wider public, participants in the initiative said.

"People think it should be free," Schoch said. "I think people forget about us. People forget about it until they really need us."

Piloting real action

The next step for the initiative is taking forward several pilot projects centered on succession planning, exploring new revenue models, providing print and digital samples for the next generation of news consumers, and developing ready-made promotions and content that can be adopted statewide.

Whether those have a deep impact or not depends on securing grant funding to take them forward, Wehrman said.

The hope is that these don't become moonshots, but practical, replicable interventions.

One of the most immediate concerns is the succession planning component, since so many independent publishers are close to retirement age.

Currently, while group-owned newspapers show stronger margins and sustainability,

independent, family-owned papers are under pressure from owners nearing retirement, the high cost of printing and distribution, and the heavy reliance on revenue from public notices.

Younger journalists are interested in taking over the reins of these papers, but are constrained by a lack of training and the need for financing to sustain operations, the research found.

"Succession planning is something that we need to offer newspapers, because there is an urgent need for newspapers to change hands," Wehrman said.

Another aspect those involved in the initiative hope can gain traction is to meet demands of news consumers, particularly younger Gen Z and Millennial ones, for both digital and print versions of a newspaper.

Offering samples of those to non-subscribers may be one way to boost circulation.

"I think there's a lot of optimism coming out of this about all of the different ways the data gathered for this can be used, and a lot of excitement about the positive momentum going forward," Huber said.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a non-profit news organization providing reliable and independent reporting on issues and events that impact the lives of North Dakotans. The organization increases the public's access to quality journalism and advances news literacy across the state. For more information about NDNC or to make a charitable contribution, please visit newscoopnd.org.

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"People are upset that the old building got into such a state of disrepair, but it didn't get like that overnight," he said. "I've got a thick skin, and I'm going to tell people like it is: where were you helping take care of the building?"

Even so, he believed the community is ready to move forward. A volunteer-run community center committee has formed to explore options for a new facility.

"There aren't any assigned officers yet," Thomsen said. "It's a group of people who see a need, and they want to do something about it."

The city already has a potential site. The elevator co-op donated a parcel of land, giving Mercer seven years to build on it before the property reverts back to the co-op.

"We need community input," Thomsen said. "The idea of these informal sessions is to get people sharing their thoughts about how the space should be set up and what we want to include."

Early ideas include a full industrial kitchen, proper restrooms and possibly a basketball half-court. These amenities would allow the center to host weddings, dances, funeral re-

ceptions, fundraisers and other events that anchor community life.

"It'd be perfect for weddings, dances and all the gatherings that bring everyone together," Volechenko said. "A few donations have already come in, so the momentum is there."

Thomsen said a new center could also support the local economy.

"We could rent it out for weddings. There's real money there," he said. "We can price it competitively with other venues in the area, bring people in. Having events there brings in all sorts of dollars. Catering dollars, bar dollars. It's not just good for the city, it's good for the area."

He said the venue could host fundraisers or benefits, as well as company holiday parties, chili cook-offs and other community events.

Thomsen stressed that no taxpayer dollars will be used to build the new center.

"It's all private: donations, grants. The city council wants to help where we can, but we aren't using tax dollars," he said. "We are still in the talking phase, but when this becomes real, some decisions need to be made about care and upkeep, and how that will work and be

funded."

As planning continues, the next steps depend on residents' ideas, involvement and willingness to help build something new.

"We need people thinking about all the possibilities," Thomsen said. "There is a real need for a new community center. We just need the funding."

For a town without a large gathering space, the stakes feel high.

"Our community doesn't have a place to gather," Thomsen said. "If you look around the area, there is no big space for a few hundred people. Without these spaces, our small communities die. We are trying to breathe life into our community. We've got to try, because if we don't, nothing's going to happen."

For now, Mercer is at the beginning of a long process. But in a town where the old community center once served as a hub of connection, many see the effort not just as a construction project, but as a chance to rebuild something deeper: a place for Mercer to come together again.

Details on upcoming community input sessions, along with the full mold assessment report, are posted on the city's website at mercercitynd.org.

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