

Data-driven blueprint points path forward for North Dakota's strained local newspapers

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.

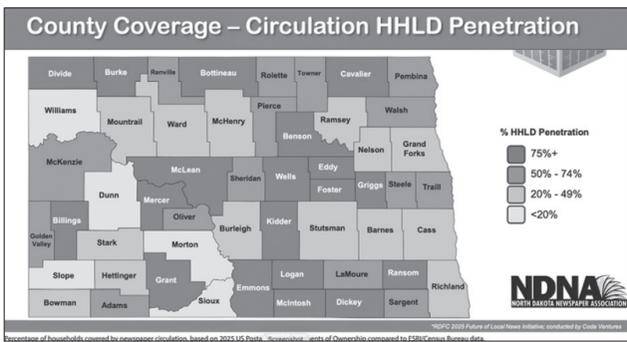
The effort, supported by a grant from the Bush Foundation, brought together journalists and publishers from across the state to gather a rare data set through surveying newspaper owners, journalists and consumers.

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 nine out of 10 news consumers believe having a local newspaper is important, with a similar amount saying that



losing 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 Gessele, 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," Gessele 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," Gessele 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 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.

This graphic shows the rates of household penetration for print newspaper subscriptions, with some of the highest rates in the most rural counties of the state. Members of the steering committee for the Future of Local News Initiative say this shows potential for advertisers and other campaigns to reach audiences in these areas, providing a needed revenue source for newspapers. Courtesy of North Dakota Newspaper Association.

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 newspapers 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 NDAREC.

"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 readymade 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.

BOTTINEAU COUNTY COURT REPORT

Speeding:

- Camryn Nell Eberline, 24, Duluth, Minn.
- Demorrist Diamond Shaw, 24, Spanish Fort, Ala.

- Ayden Gary Gourneau, 21, Rolla, N.D.
- Maverick Kenneth Moen, 15, Upham, N.D.
- Margaret Jae Schmitke, 36, Bottineau, N.D.
- Thomas Matthew Wisla, 69, Bottineau, N.D.

Violation of registration provisions-driver:

- Wanda Verdelle Henry, 73, Newburg, N.D.
- Jared Paul Hilde, 34, Maxbass, N.D.
- Phillip Oneal Runolfson, 40, Bottineau, N.D.

The following cases were presided over by Judge Anthony Benson:

DUI-.08% or greater-1st offense:

- Nikki Eileen Fowler, 39, Souris, N.D. Condition- Adult: Unsupervised probation 11 months; violate no criminal laws; chemical dependency evaluation; complete recommended treat-

ment; pay costs from bond posted. Fee totals: Criminal administration fee \$125; defense/facility administration fee \$100; fine/state \$500; victim-witness fee \$25. Fee total: \$750. Confinement: 30 days in Bottineau County Jail - Suspended. Comment: The defendant is entitled to sentence reduction credit as authorized by state law.

Possession of drug paraphernalia:

- Ethan Kyle Stephens, 18, Kramer, N.D. Condition- Adult: Violate no criminal laws; deferred imposition of sentence; notify court of address change. Fee totals: \$150

Disobedience of Judicial Order:

- Warren Lee Sneider, 62, Minot, N.D. Condition- Adult: Unsupervised probation 18 months; violate no criminal laws; have no contact. Fee totals: Criminal administration fee \$200; defense/facility administration fee \$100; fine/state \$25. Fee totals: \$325. Confinement: 360 days in Bottineau County Jail - Suspended.

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TICKETS:
Adults \$8
12 and under
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228-1119
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Bottineau Weather

Date	High	Low	Snow
2-3	10	2	0
2-4	27	10	0
2-5	32	19	0
2-6	42	24	0
2-7	24	12	0
2-8	25	19	0
2-9	37	19	0

11.5" snow this season.
8.6" this time last year.

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Lansford Weather

Date	Snow
2-3	1.3
2-4	0
2-5	0
2-6	Trace
2-7	0
2-8	0
2-9	0

19.3" snow this season.
24.2" this time last year.

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Not Available

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SESSION DATES 2026
Feb. 5 & 19
March 5 & 19
April 2, 6 & 30

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SMP Health
St. Andrew's
(701) 228-9400
314 Ohmer St | Bottineau

Initial visits are in-clinic telehealth only. Follow up appointments are optional for in-clinic telehealth or home telehealth.

THE BOTTINEAU COURANT WEATHER FEB. 11, 2026

BOTTINEAU'S SEVENDAYFORECAST

Day	High	Low	Normals	Precip
Monday	16	13	23/5	0.02"
Tuesday	37	18	23/5	0.01"
Wednesday	41	24	23/6	0.00"
Thursday	50	36	23/6	0.00"
Friday	32	26	23/6	0.00"
Saturday	37	31	24/6	0.00"
Sunday	49	30	24/7	0.00"

WEATHERHISTORY
Feb. 11, 1899 - Perhaps the greatest of all arctic outbreaks commenced on this date. The temperature plunged to 61 degrees below zero in Montana. At the same time, a "Great Eastern Blizzard" left a blanket of snow all the way from Georgia to New Hampshire.

LOCAL ALMANAC LAST WEEK

Day	High	Low	Normals	Precip
Monday	16	13	23/5	0.02"
Tuesday	37	18	23/5	0.01"
Wednesday	41	24	23/6	0.00"
Thursday	50	36	23/6	0.00"
Friday	32	26	23/6	0.00"
Saturday	37	31	24/6	0.00"
Sunday	49	30	24/7	0.00"

SUNMOON CHART THIS WEEK

Day	Sunrise	Sunset	Moonrise	Moonset
Wednesday	7:56 a.m.	5:56 p.m.	4:28 a.m.	11:45 a.m.
Thursday	7:54 a.m.	5:57 p.m.	5:26 a.m.	12:34 p.m.
Friday	7:52 a.m.	5:59 p.m.	6:13 a.m.	1:35 p.m.
Saturday	7:51 a.m.	6:01 p.m.	6:50 a.m.	2:45 p.m.
Sunday	7:49 a.m.	6:02 p.m.	7:19 a.m.	4:00 p.m.
Monday	7:47 a.m.	6:04 p.m.	7:41 a.m.	5:17 p.m.
Tuesday	7:45 a.m.	6:06 p.m.	7:59 a.m.	6:34 p.m.

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