

Data-driven blueprint offers lifeline for North Dakota's local newspapers

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 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.

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.

The North Dakota News Cooperative is a nonprofit 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. Send comments, suggestions or tips to michael@newscoopnd.org. Follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NDNewsCoop>.



Dakota Gardener

By Joseph Zeleznik, Forester – NDSU Extension

23 years from now

Decisions made today can have ramifications for decades to come.

How tall will a tree grow in 23 years?

That's a very specific question. A lot of factors go into figuring out the answer.

What tree species is it? Is it planted in a good site, with plenty of sunlight, water and nutrients? How big was the tree when it was planted? Have there been any problems, such as insects, diseases or wildlife damage? The list can go on.

As I look in my own yard, I see two 20-year-old trees, each over 30 feet tall. They're fast-growing species and are planted in a good site. Not all trees are so impressive.

Regardless, these trees remind me of the long-term decisions we make. In September 2002, when I moved to North Dakota, a little green insect was discovered in southeast Michigan, killing all the ash trees there. The scientists studying the problem called it emerald ash borer, EAB for short.

It took quite a while, but EAB finally made its way to North Dakota back in 2014, near Edgeley. Last week, it was discovered in Fargo.

This news isn't surprising. We've been expecting it for quite a while.

Each of these finds reminds me of the challenges of managing long-lived plants such as trees. The decisions we make today can have ramifications for decades to come.

For most of the state, there's still plenty of time to make those decisions. EAB travels very slowly on its own – about a half-mile each year. For folks in and around that find north of Edgeley, as well as those in the Fargo area, the time to make decisions is getting shorter. In the next five to 10 years, the infestation will

be well established in those areas, and a lot of ash trees will be dead or dying.

What do you plan to do with your ash trees?

While doing nothing is always a management option, I don't recommend it with ash trees around homes or in urban areas in the long run. Dead ash trees are brittle and dangerous. Removing a dead tree around a home or near power lines is awfully expensive.

Some people are already removing their ash trees and planting different species. This is a great option, as it reduces future risk and diversifies the urban forest – or even just your yard.

Other people have decided to treat their ash trees. Several potential chemical treatments can be used to control EAB. Emamectin benzoate, in particular, is highly effective. However, it must be injected into the stem every two or three years, which can get a bit pricey.

To be clear, we don't recommend chemical treatments unless EAB has been found within 15 miles of your location. Definitely, that covers all of the Fargo-Moorhead metro area. But most of the state is well outside that range.

As mentioned above, EAB spreads slowly, so it could be a long time before it reaches your location.

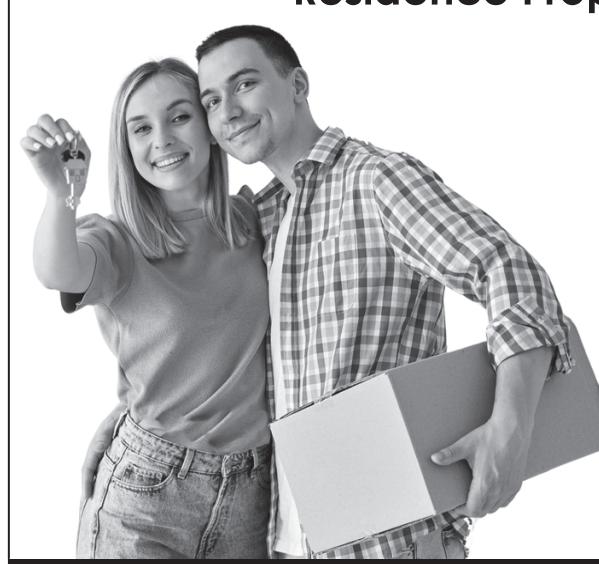
Long-term injections when EAB isn't in your area yet, could be a waste of money. If we had started injecting ash trees when I moved to North Dakota in 2002, it would have been a huge investment without a lot of return. However, if we had removed an ash tree and planted a new one, we could have a 30-foot tree by now.

Okay, maybe a 20-foot tree is more realistic.

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