

Submitter: Lee Shaker
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Rules
Measure: HB2605

My name is Lee Shaker. I'm a resident of Portland and a professor of Communication at Portland State University. Since 2006, I have studied the contributions that local media make to their communities—and the way that those contributions are lost as the public migrates from old media (like local newspapers) to new media (like Facebook). There have been very few moments of optimism as I have examined this subject—but I am hopeful that you are considering legislation now to begin addressing this problem in Oregon.

Over the past twenty years, as newspapers and other local media have withered away, contributions that we took for granted for centuries have become more apparent. Research shows that the loss of local media undermines public knowledge of local affairs, reduces civic engagement and political participation, and increases political polarization. Corruption is allowed to grow and, in recognition of this ugly reality, municipal borrowing costs increase as Wall Street hedges against the higher likelihood of bond defaults. These consequences affect us all! For generations, local media functioned because they provided a venue for commercial advertisements. They're no longer needed for that purpose—the internet provides ample opportunity for businesses to reach consumers—but the civic roles that local media assumed over time still need to be filled.

Without local media, citizens increasingly lack the infrastructure to communicate effectively with the people in their geographic environs—public officials, but also other citizens outside their social groups. Democracy cannot function without healthy communication environments: we cannot come together to advance our shared interests (and negotiate our inevitable conflicts) unless we have the spaces and tools to talk with each other. Clearly, we should not expect platforms like Facebook or TikTok to provide these spaces: they are global businesses with little interest in and no responsibility to any specific place. Yet, we all live in places—and the quality of our lives in these places is intimately tied to effective governance.

For generations, the relationship between the public and the government was mediated by local journalists. It was the reporter who attended briefings and meetings on behalf of the citizen at home, but also the reporter who spared the public official from creating their own direct line of communication to the public. As the nexus between the public and its government, local media have been integral to the democratic functioning of our towns. As local media collapse, we must find new ways to produce, share, and discuss information. New systems will inevitably develop, but if we wait passively for them to occur, we risk years (or decades) of conflict and

dysfunction—and the end result may be inferior. To have productive democratic interactions—and effective governance—it behooves us to proactively work together to develop new structures to cultivate and support public communication in our communities. We should act now, with alacrity, before our civic fabric frays further.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute these thoughts. Please support HB 2605 and fund the process it delineates fully and immediately.

Lee Shaker