Other Views

A community with no local newspaper? That's bad news

What would my town be without a newspaper? If you haven't asked yourself that question, perhaps it is time to consider just what the newspaper means to this community.

Because the doleful fact is, too many small towns and mid-sized cities are losing their newspapers right now. An extensive study from the University of North Carolina released in January found by last year, 2,100 newspapers had disappeared, or almost 25% of the 9,000 newspapers published in 2004. That translates to 1,800 communities that 15 years ago had their own newspapers that now have no original local reporting, either in print or digital.

DEAN RIDINGS
CEO, AMERICA'S NEWSPAPERS

Note this report was released just weeks before the coronavirus pandemic swept up newspapers in the same financial catastrophe that's devastated businesses of all types and sizes and thrown millions out of their jobs and households into terrifying economic uncertainty.

What does a community lose when it loses its newspapers?

The most obvious is the community's access to news about itself: the workings of its town hall; information about taxes and property values; the operation of schools for its children; the achievements, or the criminal activities, of local residents; the scores of local ball teams; schedules and reviews of movies, concerts and restaurants; and the offerings of local small businesses.

During this pandemic and in spite of their deep financial troubles, newspapers continue to provide the unique local news and information about COVID-19 — from testing spots to restrictions and openings to dining options — unavailable from any other source.

But the less obvious losses when a newspaper disappears may be the most devastating to a community.

Researchers in 2018 found when a local newspaper closes, municipal borrowing costs — and therefore residents' taxes — go up. Losing a paper, the study said, creates a "local information vacuum." It turns out lenders depend on local reporting to judge the value of government projects — and the officials in charge of them. Without that information, lenders tend to charge higher rates.

Communities without newspapers also are more likely to be victims of corruption petty and grand, local incidents the national media will never uncover. The most glaring example comes from the small California city of Bell, where — without the eyes of a local newspaper on them — the city council engineered passage of a virtually unnoticed referendum to get around a new state law capping council member salaries. Within five years, council members were taking home a cool $100,000, the police chief was being paid $450,000 — and the city manager of this municipality of just 37,000 souls was making nearly $800,000.

Losing a local newspaper, another study found, also can lead to more political polarization — something no community, nor our nation, needs now.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to avoid becoming another "news desert."

For one thing— subscribe.

But there also is pending bipartisan legislation that deserves your support. The Local Journalism Sustainability Act (H.R. 7640) provides for tax credits that support the three pillars of trusted, fair and accurate journalism: people who subscribe to newspapers or other local media; businesses that advertise in local newspapers; and newspapers that staff their newsrooms with journalists who cover the community. The tax credits aren't permanent and sunset after five years.

In a nutshell, this bill would provide every taxpayer tax credits up to $250 a year to spend on subscriptions to qualified local newspapers. It would give businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees tax credits of up to $5,000 the first year and up to $2,500 for the next four years for advertising in local newspapers or local media. And it would give local newspapers a tax credit of 80% of its compensation to journalists in the first year and 50% for the next four years.

This legislation provides a lifeline for everyone affected by the pandemic: local readers, local businesses, local news providers.

Asking your legislators in Washington to support the Local Journalism Sustainability Act is a simple step you can take to help your community from becoming yet another news desert. Just go to www.usa.gov/elected-officials for contact information for your legislators. Your right to fair and trusted local news and information is worth the effort.

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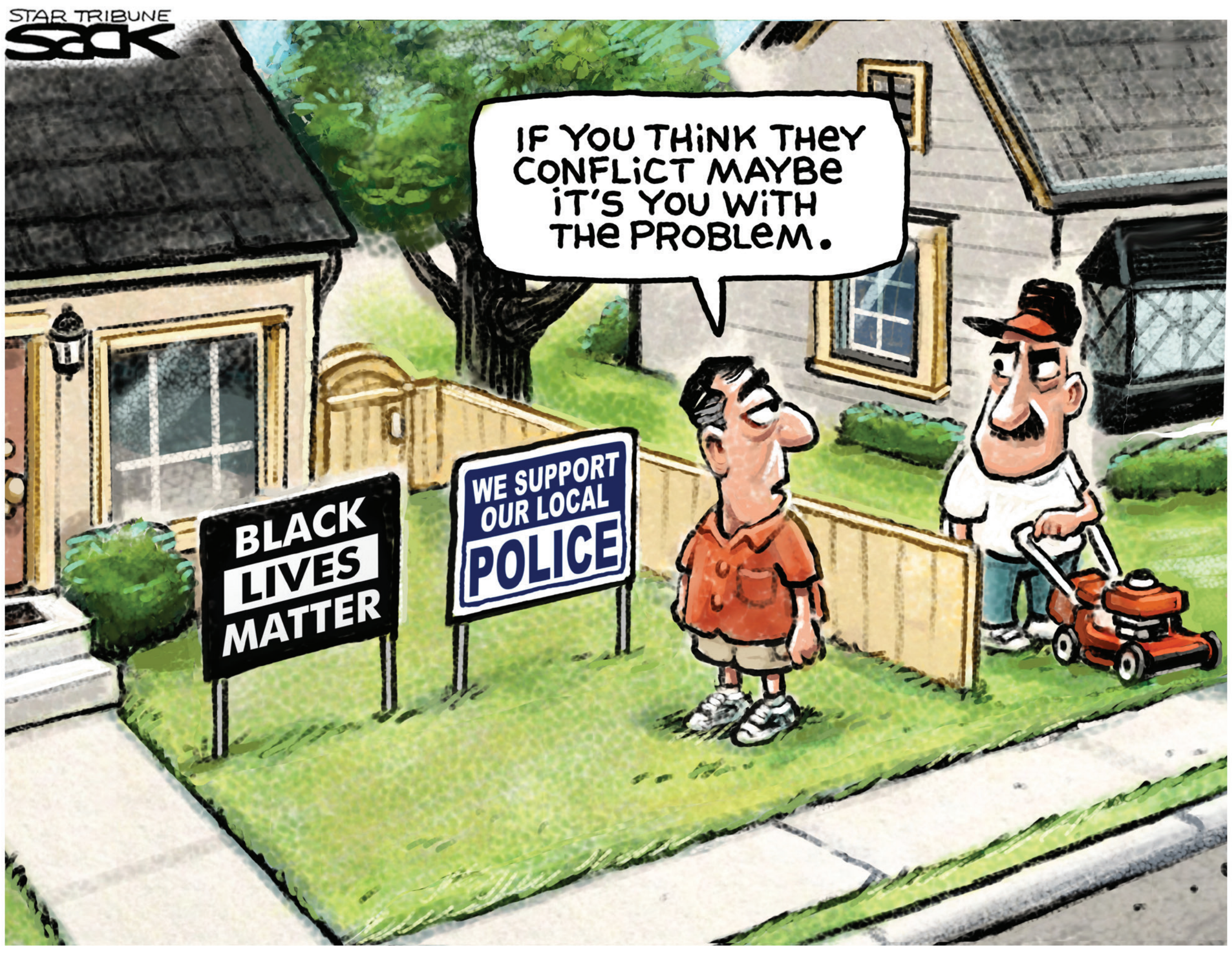
Dean Ridings is CEO of America's Newspapers, an alliance of local newspapers and related establishments committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life.



Other Views

Working to stop B2H power line

Aug. 27 is the deadline for contesting Idaho Power's proposed but unneeded power line through Union County and Eastern Oregon. For anyone who believes that Idaho Power's Boardman to Hemingway Transmission line will provide more benefit than damage — forget it. Presently Idaho Power is polishing up their 700-plus page application for their permit from the Oregon Department of Energy.

WHIT DESCHNER
BAKER CITY

However, contrary to their PR about being a down-home honest corporation, their track record of misinformation remains on course. Here are some — just a few of many — items that Idaho Power is trying to slip by and hide unnoticed in their permit application.

The transmission line would run 305 miles through Eastern Oregon, and Idaho Power proposes to weasel out of responsibility for wildfires they start during construction or from downed lines. Local volunteer fire departments will carry the burden of fire containment. In other words, they can start a fire like the one that burned up Paradise and kill 80-some people but won't be responsible.

Where the power lines cross private lands, access roads used for building and maintaining the power lines may be gated and locked, denying public access. Road building will be allowed within 25 feet of streams, meaning the current laws protecting streams and rivers in Oregon are worthless. We are letting an out-of-state corporation run roughshod over regulations made to protect us and our environment.

ODOE plans to allow Idaho Power's power line to exceed the World Health Organization's recommended decibel level and Idaho Power is fudging its numbers, meaning it does not know either because of incompetence or the company does know and is pulling the wool over our ears.

ODOE requires a bond to restore the land in case Idaho Power quits the project or goes bankrupt. ODOE is allowing a bond amount of $1 good for 50 years. What is the purpose of a buck bond if it doesn't protect the citizens it is there for? Who is ODOE working for?

This is the iceberg's tip. What other stop-at-nothing tactics Idaho Power has hidden in this application is anyone's guess. ODOE can't tell us nor does it appear they plan to. Unfortunately, public input for this near-final round is closed but not for our public representatives.

La Grande-bred Stop B2H is fighting an entire stable of corporate law-trained Goliaths. But where are the rest of our representatives to stop this debacle? Don't let Idaho Power ruin Eastern Oregon. Government agencies such as ODOE are there to protect the public, not to help out-of-state for-profit corporations invade and erode the standards of our rural endangered lifestyle. It's way overdue for other representatives to kick in for what they were elected and/or hired to do: Represent the people.

Stop B2H.

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Whit Deschner has lived in Baker County for the last 38 years and is the instigator of The Great Salt Lick, a fundraiser for Parkinson's research in Baker City for the past 13 years.

Contact your public officials

President Donald Trump: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1414; fax 202-456-2461; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov/contact.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Pendleton office: 310 S.E. Second St. Suite 105, Pendleton 97801; 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

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Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. N.E., Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

State Sen. William S. Hansell (29th District/Athena): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-423, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1729. Website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/hansell. Email: sen.billhansell@oregonlegislature. gov.

State Rep. Greg Barreto (58th District/Cove): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-384, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1458. Website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/barreto. Email: rep.gregbarreto@oregonlegislature.gov.

State Rep. Greg Smith (57th District/Heppner): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-482, Salem, OR, 97301; 503-986-1457. Heppner office: P.O. Box 219, Heppner, OR 97836; 541-676-5154; Website: www.oregonlegislature.gov/smithg. Email: rep.gregsmith@oregonlegislature.gov.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

City of La Grande: Mayor Steve Clements, City Manager Robert Strope; P.O. Box 670, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-1309; fax 541-963-3333.

Union County Commissioners: Donna Beverage, Matt Scarfo and Paul Anderes; 1106 K Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-963-1001; fax 541-963-1079.

Wallowa County Commissioners: John Hillock, Todd Nash and Susan Roberts; 101 S. River St., Room 202, Enterprise, OR 97828; 541-426-4543, ext. 11.

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La Grande City Council: Mayor Steve Clements, Gary Lillard, Nicole Howard, Corrine Dutto, Mary Ann Miesner, Justin Rock; through the city manager's office, 541-962-1309.

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A division of EO MEDIA group
eomediagroup.com

THE OBSERVER
An independent newspaper founded in 1896
(USPS 299-260)

Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, Oregon 97801. Published Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays (except Dec. 25) by EO Media Group, 911 Jefferson Ave., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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Send address changes to:
The Observer,
911 Jefferson Ave.,
La Grande, OR 97850

Periodicals postage paid at:
Pendleton, Oregon 97801

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