



STATE OF VERMONT
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

To: House Appropriations Committee

From: Rep. Kathleen James
Bennington-4: Arlington, Manchester, Sandgate, Sunderland

Re: **FY25 Funding Request**
Vermont Access Network: \$1 million in one-time funding
Why it matters: community media, news deserts and the future of democracy

Dear colleagues:

I'm writing about a topic that matters to all of us: the future of community media and the role it plays in building an informed citizenry. In a time of political polarization, social media, fake news, and the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation online, few things are as important as keeping community media alive.

Vermont's community media centers connect Vermonters directly to the workings of local and state government (election coverage, live interactive public meetings, legislative coverage), to each other (community events, local arts and culture) and to the world beyond (lectures, presentations, voices from outside Vermont). My own local station, GNAT-TV, also hosts talk shows, provides robust reporting on topics of local and statewide interest that's factual and objective, hosts legislative and candidate forums, and even covers my constituent coffee hours from time to time!

Why does this matter so much, and why does it matter right now? Because according to a [2023 report](#) by Northwestern University, since 2005 the United States has lost more than 3,000 newspapers and 43,000 newspaper journalists. Almost 1,800 counties are defined as "news deserts," defined as having one or zero local newspapers. Most communities that lose a local newspaper, typically a weekly, never get a replacement. And to make matters worse, the country is splitting into journalism "haves" — affluent cities and suburbs — versus the "have nots," which are often low-income, underserved urban communities and rural regions.

Some interesting solutions are evolving as policymakers realize the critical importance of objective, fact-based journalism and community media in upholding democracy. The federal government and states are investing in high-speed broadband (as we are here in Vermont). Major philanthropic organizations, like the MacArthur Foundation, are helping to support legacy and start-up media. Universities are leading the way, too, with academic and public-private partnerships, including our own [Center for Community News at UVM](#).

So far, Vermont is doing OK...for now. According to the [Northwestern study](#), we have only one county without a news source (Essex). But increasingly, small community newspapers lack the resources — the time, the money, the reporting staff — to cover civic life and local and state government in a comprehensive way. That's where our community media centers come in! From select boards to city councils, from school boards to planning commissions, they fill a vital role in keeping voters connected and informed. They are providing the coverage that, increasingly, newspapers cannot. You can see what a great job they're doing [at this link](#).

In FY21, the Vermont legislature identified public, educational and government (PEG) access as an “essential service” for Vermont through its continuing coverage of public health messages, public meetings and preserving local identity. In recognition, the legislature provided financial support during the pandemic and funded a PEG study to help plan for the future of community media.

The PEG study, released in January 2021, confirms the inevitable decline of cable revenue in Vermont — the primary source of funding for PEG — coupled with rising costs to meet increasing need for public meeting coverage and community communications. The study recommended that the legislature restructure our telecom tax structure and take a new look at how PEG — **a public benefit** — will be funded in the future.

In the meantime, we need to provide a \$1 million one-time appropriation to help cover this cost, while working diligently for a long-term and permanent funding stream.

I hope you will consider this request. It’s absolutely essential that we retain a vibrant, stable network of PEG-TV stations in our communities. In today’s world, when so many of our democratic institutions seem fragile and under attack, informed voters are the best and brightest hope.

Rep. Kathleen James

Bennington-4

Vermont House of Representatives

KJames@leg.state.vt.us

802.733.1435