

STATEMENT OF ROSS CONNELLY

CONCERNING DR 18-0114 BEFORE THE HOUSE GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE – Feb. 8, 2018

Rep. Townsend and committee members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about the draft proposal to amend Vermont's Administrative Procedure Act.

My name is Ross Connelly. I speak from my perspective of having owned The Hardwick Gazette from 1986 to 2017, and of having served on the boards of and having been president of both the Vermont Press Association and the New England Press Association.

Currently, notice of proposed rules and regulatory changes must be published in newspapers. It is important this is maintained as a "shall" in DR 18-0114.

I raise this concern because democracy in this country is considered to be of, by and for the people. To work, a democracy requires engaged and informed citizens.

Democracy in Vermont is enhanced by the presence of more than four dozen daily and non-daily newspapers. Some of these newspapers currently publish legal advertisements required by the Administrative Procedure Act.

Vermont newspapers employ local residents, pay local taxes, and purchase goods and services from other local businesses. They are part of the communities they cover, they are part of the fabric of the state.

Newspapers are available to all. Some are free and the rest are available by subscription, on a newsstand or in a library. And, essentially, all Vermont's newspapers have an online presence. Notice of proposed rules and regulations that appear in a newspaper are not stand-alone documents that have no connection to a particular community.

In January, the Vermont Secretary of State's office reported the State of Wyoming spent \$800,000 for an online platform to publish state rules and regulations. The money went to a Utah business. After adopting this online platform, the State of Wyoming eliminated the requirement that legal ads also be published in newspapers.

Where would be the savings to Vermont by sending \$800,000 of its taxpayers' money to an out-of-state business that does not employ Vermont residents, does not pay local property taxes, and does not buy goods and services from other Vermont businesses? How would sending \$800,000 of

Vermont taxpayers' money to an out-of-state business help Vermont's economy?

If the State of Vermont decided to eliminate newspaper publication of public notices/legal ads, legal advertising on the local level could easily follow.

Legal advertising is part of the mix of income newspapers rely on to pay their bills. Were any of the dozens of Vermont newspapers to decrease their coverage or to go out of business, the towns and areas they cover — the people who live there — would be less informed about their communities. Where is the savings in that? Democracy would be devalued.

A column in the Monday, Feb. 5 New York Times spoke about decreasing newspaper coverage in Nashville, Tenn., and elsewhere in that state because of a decline in newspaper advertising there. The column, by Margaret Renkl, reported on a speech Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam gave last week to the Tennessee Press Association. Renkl said the governor recognized there are risks to not maintaining news organizations. Haslam is quoted as saying, "This is going to be a really important political year. This is a real governor's race. We have a Senate race that's really important, not just for the state but the country, and a number of congressional seats in play. My fear is that all of these won't be covered in the detail they traditionally have."

Voters need more than a centralized website listing the hundreds of proposed rules and regulations, and supporting documents, to sift through to be informed. An online platform in the Secretary of State's office may be touted as a way to save money, although there is no mention of yearly costs to maintain a centralized website. The quest for online publication also ignores the fact newspapers are already posting legal notices in two locations — in their print and online editions.

Without newspapers, the state would lose the current, broad, arms-length oversight Vermont's many newspapers now provide. That would create a deficit in the information citizens receive as they seek understanding of their state and local governments — a deficit in their ability to have a government of, by and for the people. That is a deficit in democracy.

Citizens have a right to be informed. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787, "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Newspapers were necessary then and are necessary today. Democracy depends on them.