

STATEMENT OF ROSS CONNELLY
CONCERNING S.97, BEFORE THE SENATE GOVERNMENT
OPERATIONS COMMITTEE – JAN. 11, 2018

Sen. White and committee members, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about S.97, a bill to allow online news organizations to carry legal advertisements that are now required to be published in a newspaper of record.

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.

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. They cover large geographic areas, cities and small towns. They address statewide issues and matters of interest to only segments of the state's population. These newspapers employ local residents, pay local taxes, and purchase goods and services from other local businesses. They are part of the communities they cover.

S.97 would lead to the loss of income for these many newspapers. Were any of these newspapers to go out of business, the towns and areas they cover — the people who live there — would be less informed about their communities. Democracy would be undermined.

Current law requires that legal advertising be placed in newspapers that serve a specific area. An online news service, if allowed to be a platform to carry paid, legal advertising, opens the door to allow any one of those organizations to claim it serves any area, as the internet is worldwide.

Will out-of-town or out-of-state websites cover the local town government and schools, employ local residents, spend their income locally, contribute to a sense of community?

Yes, one online organization in the state could carry all the legal advertisements of all municipalities and other bodies that must have legal advertisement. However, one online news organization would not provide consistent, professional, local news coverage — coverage that is needed by citizens — that is currently provided by the dozens of weekly and daily newspapers the state's citizens are fortunate to have. And who would want that? Do we want an online “Amazon” of journalism, in Vermont or elsewhere?

By reading a newspaper, citizens can learn about their select boards, schools and supervisory unions, zoning and planning bodies, library trustees, environmental commissions, courts, state agencies... 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. Online visibility for legal advertisement already exists in any newspaper that has an online edition.

A newspaper is not radio, television, cable, the internet or social media. A number of radio and television stations broadcast to Hardwick, but they don't provide much coverage of local news in the towns covered by The Hardwick Gazette. I have yet to see an online news organization consistently report on the meetings of the various boards and commissions I

mentioned. The local cable station provides a live feed of the Hardwick Select Board. Turning a camera on at a board meeting doesn't necessarily provide explanation, context, background and exploration of an issue needed to grasp the impact of a decision. Voters need more than a 30-second news clip, a sound bite or a blogger's opinion. Towns covered by local newspapers would be different places if local newspapers ceased to be.

To allow online news organizations to carry legal advertising would lessen citizens' chances to see how the public interest is addressed by those who are elected, appointed and volunteer. That is one implication of a policy decision I hope the Legislature will consider as this bill, and its companion bill, H.483, in the House, are considered.

Yes, online news organizations may provide tiny tax savings to municipalities and other legal organizations that are required to advertise. Those economic savings, however, will impact a local newspaper's ability to cover local news. That will create a deficit in the information citizens receive as they seek understanding of their 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. Democracy depends on that.