

Dear Senators White, Pollina, Collamore, Clarkson, and Ram Hinsdale:

I recently learned of your Senate Committee on Government Operations' hearings about updating the rules concerning **legal notices (S.174)**. Watching [recordings of the hearings](#), I heard misrepresentations of our small business and want to set the record straight. I'm also writing to share FPF's point of view about the importance of both local journalism and legal notices vis-a-vis S.174.

FRONT PORCH FORUM

[Front Porch Forum](#) is a family-owned Vermont public benefit corporation. My wife Valerie and I started FPF to support our Burlington neighborhood in 2006 and it's grown to now serve every single community in the state. We employ a staff of 24 spread across Vermont.

Each local forum that we host is moderated by our carefully trained staff of online community managers and adheres to our detailed Terms of Use. Our team reviews every posting before publication.

For every 1,000 households that exist in the state, FPF has 750 members. This is more traction than Facebook or any other platform. About 89% of our members report opening nearly every issue of their forum. And they submit tens of thousands of postings every month to share with their neighbors about a wide variety of topics.

Also, more than 2,000 local public officials use FPF to connect with their constituents. And more than 11,000 small businesses and nonprofits have created listings in our online directory, using FPF to find local customers, employees, suppliers and more. In addition, we provide local event calendars for every community in the state.

Every day, FPF helps neighbors connect and build community using our service. Thousands of Vermonters have written to share their FPF-facilitated neighbor-helping-neighbor stories, their small business successes, their FPF-fueled fund-raising results, their enhanced town meeting discussions and more. FPF is so much more than a bulletin board at the market.

In the past year alone, FPF's community-building success for Vermont has been mentioned in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Politico* and *Fast Company*, and by NPR, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and the Aspen Institute.

Each local forum is unique and has its own character. For example, the forums in Rutland Town, Woodstock and Putney, among others, are on the quieter side. By contrast, the forums in Middlesex, Montpelier, Burlington and most of the rest of the state are bursting with energy, with a majority of local households participating and submitting 10 to 60 postings per day.

FPF's core services are free of charge, and anyone who lives, works, or owns property in Vermont can join their local Forum for free via our website or mobile app. We cover our costs via advertising sales to local businesses, community nonprofits, and public agencies. In addition, we charge these entities if they want more than our free-level of two-way access. We also gratefully accept donations from our members.

LOCAL JOURNALISM

To be clear, Front Porch Forum does not employ journalists. However, we absolutely recognize that local journalism is essential to our democracy and that it is in crisis, including in our state. Supporting local journalism is very much in keeping with our community-building mission.

To that end, FPF actively supports local journalism in a variety of ways. First, we help journalists stay connected to what's going on locally. More than 100 reporters use FPF as a source for stories. We see published local news articles every week that reference FPF's community discussions. Second, FPF increases the audience for local reporting. We've heard repeatedly from our members who say they didn't read local news in the past, but once they joined FPF (often for more transactional purposes) they were drawn into discussions about local issues. Those discussions prompted them to read news stories on the topic, often via links shared by neighbors on FPF.

So, while FPF is not a newspaper and has never claimed to be one, it has become an essential part of Vermont's changing media landscape. More Vermonters learn about local issues and keep up with what's going on in their community via FPF than any other single platform.

LEGAL NOTICES

FPF hadn't planned to testify about changing the rules for legal notices, but since we've been drawn in, I'll add the following.

Local journalism is essential to our democracy and way of life. It's in crisis, including in Vermont.

I agree that government should help fund journalism (witness NPR, PBS, and nonprofit (i.e., tax-exempt) news), and that new mechanisms should be developed to support for-profit community-based journalism too.

Legal notices serve a critically important function in our state that is separate from local journalism. The primary goal of Vermont's legal-notice rules should be to effectively communicate critical legal information to the public, not to subsidize for-profit news (including several out-of-state corporate owners who have cut news staff repeatedly for years).

Current legal-notice rules appear to be failing, in that most Vermonters don't see these notices because so few people consume news via ink on newsprint. For example, the Burlington Free Press print circulation dropped from 45,000 in 2006 (the year FPF launched) to 8,000 in 2021.

Insisting that only notices that appear in printed newspapers meet State requirements, in the year 2022, frankly, is shocking. Much work is being done on many fronts across the country to make public information *more* accessible, and these efforts are often led by journalists. Deciding to continue with our current regulation goes in the opposite direction, making legal notices *less* accessible to Vermonters as printed news continues to shrink.

Community newspapers are well situated to publish legal notices via newsprint AND / OR by digital means. A change to State policy that **also** allows for digital notices does not exclude existing newspapers from continuing to provide this key service. It gives them flexibility.

All this said, I respectfully suggest that Vermont legal-notice rules be modernized so that the notices become more accessible. AND I implore the State to seriously and quickly explore paths to funding for-profit Vermont-owned newspapers so that they can continue doing their critically important work before more shut their doors for good.

One idea would be to create a mechanism through which people and foundations who donate money to for-profit newspapers get the same tax benefit as when they donate to nonprofit organizations. This could open up significant and sustainable revenue for the dozens of Vermont community newspapers that still exist.

Thank you for your attention and for your work on behalf of all Vermonters.

Michael Wood-Lewis, Co-Founder & CEO

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Essential civic infrastructure in Vermont.