

Dear Senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony on S.174.

I appreciate the Senate Government Operations Committee's interest in moving forward with electronic notices at a time when dramatic losses in advertising revenue and further erosion of print readership continues to threaten the viability of local newspapers.

A lot has changed since 2018 when I first testified about electronic notices. Who knew we would be even more dependent on devices as we navigate the pandemic?

Unfortunately, over the past four years there has been a significant decline in local newspaper readership, more financial pressure on publishers, and a dramatic shift toward online news. All of this has led to a crisis here in Vermont, with more newspapers on the brink of insolvency.

The purpose of publishing government notices is to inform the public and the goal is to reach the greatest number of citizens in a way that is most likely to reach them. Traditionally, that has been accomplished through a printed press which was once ubiquitous throughout Vermont.

Now, most Vermonters get their news and information online, and the majority get their news on cellphones. There are about 170,000 Facebook subscribers in Vermont, and with the advent of Covid more services and products have become available online, too.

"Overall, nearly nine-in-ten Americans (89%) currently get at least some local news digitally (through news websites, apps or social media) and 41% do so often," according to Pew Research. And about 95% of people between the ages of 18 and 49 use smart phones. The average rate across age group is 85% of Americans.

As the Executive Director of the Vermont Journalism Trust, the parent company of VTDigger, I am more concerned than ever about the state of local news.

Here are the steps we've taken to support community media:

- We once charged local papers for use of our stories; we are now giving away content for free to weeklies with circulations under 7,000.
- The Trust is the fiscal agent for the Waterbury Roundabout in a pilot project designed to see whether this could be a model for other efforts to support local journalism.

I am here today to ask for your help to support the public's access to important information across the state. We are asking you to spearhead the transition to electronic notices as more community newspapers go online only. It is critically important that electronic notices -- a lifeline for local news organizations -- be permitted as a substitute for print legal notices.

At this juncture, 7 community news organizations are online only:

- Chester Telegraph <https://www.chestertelegraph.org/>
- The Newport Dispatch <https://newportdispatch.com/>
- Waterbury Roundabout <https://www.waterburyroundabout.org/>
 - Created after the local weekly print newspaper folded
- Colchester Sun <https://www.colchestersun.com/>
- Essex Reporter <https://www.essexreporter.com/>
- Milton Independent <https://www.miltonindependent.com/>
- Hardwick Gazette <https://hardwickgazette.com/>

Most recently, the Hardwick Gazette has been forced to suspend print publication and is now entirely online. The [publisher](#) recently told his story on VPR and lamented the fact that the digital forum deprives the paper of access to the legal notice revenue stream.

Our objective is to help lift all boats. We have no interest in competing with local newspapers for local notices. VTDigger is interested in being able to publish statewide legal notices as an appropriate fit for the focus of our statewide reporting efforts.

VTDigger reaches about 650,000 unique readers per month. Of that number 60%, or 390,000 are people in Vermont and they read VTDigger at least once a month. Our weekly readership is between 170,000 and 250,000; on a daily basis we draw 40,000-60,000 readers to the site.

Because of the shrinking accessibility to and thus readership of the Burlington Free Press, the Rutland Herald and Times Argus, fewer Vermonters across the state have access to statewide legal notices. The print circulation of the Free Press has dropped from 16,035 in 2017 to just 8,011 in 2021. Seven Days is distributed largely in Central and Northwestern Vermont.

I am here today to speak in support of S.174 in general, with one small request for a change.

one clause in the Senate version sets a threshold that would be impossible for any local news organization (other than VTDigger) -- in print or online -- to meet: "For municipal notices, the website must be regularly accessed and trafficked by a number of persons from that municipality representing not less than 50 percent of the municipality's population."

I mention this because I understand that the intent of this legislation is to ensure greater access to information for people who live in Vermont. By setting a bar that no media outlet could meet, the bill would inadvertently erode the opportunity for legitimate news gathering organizations to provide this essential service to Vermonters. We urge you to strike that line altogether.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about this bill, and for your consideration of this important issue. I and my team are happy to be available to you as you work on the bill and hopefully pass it this year.