

LWV-Kitsap Bremerton/CK Unit Meeting Notes--Saturday, February 25, 2023

Kitsap United Way Conference Room/Zoom

In Person: Maureen Cervinsky, John Cervinsky, Kathleen Cahall, Suzanne Schreiner, Janice McLemore, Connie Marchant, Katie Pratt, Raejean Bridges-Avalos, Debbie Klabo, Charlie Mackall, Martha Burke (NK)
Via Zoom: Candy Rankin, Gail Sackman, Denise Justice, Pat Troxell, Debi Barner

SAVE THE DATE: SATURDAY, MARCH 18 @ 10AM

OUR NEXT UNIT MEETING WILL BE A PLANNING SESSION--MORE DETAILS TO COME

Kathleen Cahall led us in this special Consensus Process unit meeting, as she did in November, 2022, when we looked at the LWVWA Shorelines Study. This current LWVWA study is entitled *The Decline of Local News and its Impact on Democracy*. Our unit's responses to & comments about the five Consensus Questions will be added to those of the other three LWV-K units' input, from which a single **Consensus** statement from our local President & Board will be sent to LWVWA. From there, a formal **Position** will be drafted incorporating the agreed upon issues, which the League can then use for **Advocacy** actions.

Kathleen stated and we all agreed that, while we were aware that local newspapers have been in trouble for some time, we had no idea of the scope and severity of the problem until we read this thorough study, prepared over a 2-year period by 12 LWV members representing various units spread throughout Washington state.

The Associated Press identifies a local, daily newspaper as one that provides original local news reporting three or more days a week. The study committee included online-only outlets as newspapers if they provide comprehensive reporting of an area's people, government agencies, schools, and activities.

Bremerton/Central Kitsap Unit Consensus Meeting re *Decline of Local News and its Impact on Democracy*--February 25, 2023

Discussion Leader: Kathleen Cahall

Number of Persons Participating: 16

Discussion Question #1: Where do you, your family and friends turn for reliable local news?

Most participants subscribe to & read Kitsap Sun, whether in print edition and/or online. Many also either subscribe to The Seattle Times online daily and/or receive their Sunday print edition via home delivery. Kitsap Sun is now being sent via mail to one member's homes in Holly & in Bremerton rather than being delivered by hand. Some spoke about reading Kitsap Daily News, North Kitsap Herald, Central Kitsap Reporter; all are weekly or monthly publications in Kitsap County from Sound Publishing and are full of local content. We recognize that this LWVWA study focused on local newspapers. Our membership acknowledged other frequently used news sources, as well: for regional as well as local news, several talked about listening regularly to KUOW, the Seattle NPR radio station & about reading news stories online from nonprofit Crosscut Media; one member regularly reads Sightline Institute & The Urbanist online offerings.

Mindful of time, we skipped Discussion Question #2 & moved on to:

Consensus Question #1:

One of the main missions of the League--at all levels, national, state and local--is to provide civic and voter education to communities.

A. Please rate how important local newspapers are in assisting in this mission: **HIGHLY**

B. Please rate how well your local newspaper performs in this public service: **MODERATELY WELL**

Comments: Kathleen stated from first-hand experience working with the City of Bremerton Public Works that, pre-COVID, Kitsap Sun used to be tenacious in keeping city government officials accountable. With diminished resources resulting in fewer reporters, our unit members noted that the frequency and depth of coverage of city and county government issues are not as thorough or as timely. The newspaper no longer has beat reporters who regularly attend scheduled meetings, so there is not enough coverage to our liking of civic and voter education issues. One member said she was disappointed in the emphasis on sports in the Kitsap Sun.

However, given the financial restraints the newspaper is under, we feel Kitsap Sun is doing Reasonably Well. We could not in all good conscience say Kitsap Sun is doing poorly; the editor & staff work very hard & are doing their best with the limited resources at hand. Had there been another category in between Moderately Well & Poorly, we would have chosen that.

Consensus Question #2:

Many historians and scholars believe that freedom of the press, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution, implied that the government had the fundamental obligation to see that journalism actually existed.

A. Do you agree that this is a valid interpretation of the founders' intentions? **STRONGLY AGREE**

B. Furthermore, is it important that such an interpretation prevails today? **STRONGLY AGREE**

Consensus Question #3:

Local newspapers, as a cornerstone of a free press, are essential to our democracy. **STRONGLY AGREE**

Comments: Members talked about how countless local government services--fire, police, planning, courts, parks, public works, the list goes on& on--are those that have the greatest impact on our daily lives. Local government officials who propose the policies that govern how those services function can only be held accountable if there are local watchdogs looking after the public's interests.

Consensus Question #4:

Federal, state, and local governments have supported news publishers with tax breaks, postal subsidies and the printing of public notices since before the country's founding.

A. The government (at any level) should provide some type of financial support to newspapers.
STRONGLY AGREE

Comments: One member noted this question takes us back to #2, talking about Freedom of the Press in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Because we strongly believe, as the Founding Fathers did, that local journalism is a public good, then we should not leave our newspapers up to market control, but rather help them to thrive, in part with governmental support.

B. What types of support are or would be acceptable? Rank in your order of support for each.

- 4 Direct financing
- 2 Tax Credits
- 3 Easier transition to nonprofit status
- 1 Legislation to allow publishers to negotiate collectively with Big Tech

Comments:

Criteria for Support:

---A healthy percentage of Big Tech's oversized advertising dollars gained by posting advertisements alongside local newspapers' online editions should be redirected. A long overdue arrangement for fair compensation should be mandated by law.

---Especially because the internet has no code of ethics, it is imperative that local newspapers continue to lead the way in maintaining a strong code of ethics. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics

declares four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media: Seek Truth and Report It; Minimize Harm; Act Independently; and Be Accountable and Transparent. <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

---When encouraging the nonprofit model, we need to support cost of subscription subsidies for those who cannot afford it.

Restrictions:

---Any governmental financial support, be it direct financing or tax credits, needs to be coupled with the proviso that newspapers retain full editorial control.

---In order to gain nonprofit status, newspapers should have to agree not to endorse any political candidates.

C. What suggestions other than government funding do you have to improve the situation of a lack of local news?

Comments:

Criteria for Support:

---To encourage local high school students in the journalism field, a designated student (maybe on a rotating basis) could attend his/her local school board meeting & write a report for the school newspaper (if one exists) and the local daily/weekly newspaper(s) in the student's community.

---To help inform communities of the scope and severity of this problem, ask local libraries to choose a book about the decline in local news for their yearly community reading program. One suggested title: *Ghosting the News* by Margaret Sullivan.

---Ask local libraries to partner with their local League of Women Voters to sponsor a community forum addressing this pervasive crisis, featuring local journalists & perhaps one of the 12 LWVWA study writers or one of their sources for the study.

---Concerned community activists could plan a countywide outreach/fundraising event for their local newspaper. The study mentioned some communities having some success with this approach.

---Training of citizen observer/reporters, to help them understand the workings of local government, could tie in to LWV's Observer Corps. Interested members who regularly attend meetings of any governmental entity could be additional eyes and ears for their local newspaper, alerting the editor to any important issues.

---Local newspapers could sponsor occasional experiential journalism events, such as those Kitsap Sun's former reporter Josh Farley planned--linking the newspaper in the community's mind with informative and entertaining happenings.

---We are fortunate that David Nelson, our local Kitsap Sun's editor, established Kitsap Sun Journalism Fund, a nonprofit fund held by the Kitsap Community Foundation that allows community members to make contributions to help preserve and potentially grow local journalism in our county. This external fund also allows them to seek & accept grant funding. Summer internships are the current priority for the fund's use. Similar funds could benefit other local newspapers.

Restrictions:

We felt positive about the following two suggestions, but are aware that, for different reasons, they may not be effective:

---Local government entities designating a communications liaison who would establish a relationship with someone at the local newspaper(s) & regularly report to the local media (we realize that local governments are also struggling with decreased resources and staff)

---Support broadband expansion to increase access for rural & marginalized communities (at the same time, we recognize that the expansion of online "news" sources--some legitimate and some not--has greatly contributed to the decline of the local newspaper)

Consensus Question # 5:

The crisis of the local newspaper decline has affected residents who are poor and those who live in rural communities more than other populations. This is often due to increased subscription prices, limited internet connectivity, and device costs. There should be support for ensuring access for all to local news.

STRONGLY AGREE

Recorded by Candy Rankin