

OPINION

“Where all men think alike, few men think at all.” ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

GUEST COLUMN | Robb Hicks

A town without a newspaper loses more than news

During National Newspaper Week, we should all ask what would happen if our local newspaper suddenly disappeared.

Our community would lose more than headlines.

We would lose the public record of who voted for what, how tax dollars were spent and which promises were kept. We would lose the watchdog that asks the hard questions.

We would also lose the chronicle of daily life: obituaries, births, honor rolls, ballgames, county fairs, veterans programs, business openings, retirements and the small acts of service that hold a town together.

A newspaper is not just paper and ink. It is part of the civic fabric that holds a community together.

That is why the crisis facing local newspapers should concern everyone, not just people in the news business.

According to Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, close to 3,500 newspapers have disappeared in the United States since 2005. In the past year alone, another 148 vanished through closures or mergers.

About 50 million Americans now have limited or no access to local news. Nearly 80 percent of the nation’s news deserts are in predominantly rural counties.

This did not happen because people stopped needing local news. It happened because the old business model broke down.

For generations, newspapers were supported by readers, advertisers and public notices. That worked when downtowns were strong, businesses were locally owned and advertising decisions were made by people who lived in town.

The local hardware store bought an ad because its owner lived here, knew the newspaper and understood



that supporting local institutions was part of doing business in the community.

When that store becomes one location in a regional or national chain, the advertising decision may be made hundreds or thousands of miles away — if there is any local advertising at all.

The store may still be here. The advertising dollars are not.

At the same time, more local advertising dollars are flowing to social media and other digital platforms. Those companies can sell clicks. But they do not cover city council meetings, county budgets, school boards, youth baseball or print every kid on the honor roll.

Newspapers must modernize. We have to make our websites better, improve our digital products, reach readers in new ways and become more efficient.

But technology alone cannot replace a strong local business base.

Philanthropy can help. Foundations can fund reporting projects, student journalism, technology and innovation. But grants are a bridge, not a permanent road for most community newspapers.

There is another part of the equation that deserves more attention.

Local newspapers have spent decades providing public-service information that government agencies and nonprofit organizations need communities to see — often at no cost.

There is an important difference between news and public information.

Reporters should decide what is news. Government agencies should not expect a news story to replace a communications budget.

If an agency needs the public to understand a tax program, election, health service, school initiative or government program, it should budget to communicate that information through trusted local media.

The same is true for nonprofits. A news release is not a communications plan. If telling people about available services or important community work is part of the mission, telling that story should also be part of the budget.

Some states have started to act, creating tax credits and other programs to help protect local journalism jobs.

Congress should move, too. The Community News and Small Business Support Act would help keep or expand local coverage in rural communities while also helping small businesses advertise in their local market.

That matters because local stores are fighting their own battle.

They cannot compete online against Amazon, national chains and big-box retailers with enormous advertising budgets and sophisticated digital marketing operations.

Helping small businesses advertise locally could strengthen downtown businesses and local news coverage at the same time.

Saving local news is not about nostalgia.

It is about whether communities can still make informed decisions, preserve their shared history and hold those in power accountable.

A community without a newspaper does not become better informed. It becomes more dependent on rumor, social media, press releases and outside narratives.

It becomes less informed, less connected and easier to mislead. Accountability weakens. Civic engagement declines. And gradually, a community loses part of its shared identity.

Newspapers are not dead. But they are fragile, and they are under pressure.

People still read newspapers. They still value public notices. They still rely on local newspapers to understand their communities.

In other words, they still matter. Maybe now more than ever.

Robb Hicks is a third-generation Wyoming newspaperman and publisher of the Buffalo Bulletin. In 2025, Hicks, his wife Jen Sieve-Hicks, and Rob and Shaylee Mortimore stepped in after eight Wyoming newspapers abruptly closed in 2025. Together, they re-opened the papers, restored local news coverage and kept those communities from becoming news deserts. Today, their growing newspaper group is focused on finding sustainable ways to preserve strong, locally owned journalism in rural communities.

ADVOCACY | Sarah Kessinger

Local news binds a county community

It’s National Newspaper Week and I’m finding myself too buried in newspaper reporting, editing and business contract renewal season to type out the column I’d hoped to finish on our ongoing community journalism project.

I will have to run it next week. But in the meantime, it’s important to note the Advocate learned a lot through the community survey that

was part of the project and learned that our readers want more features, which is exactly what many of us on the news staff like to write.

So I’ll be focusing on seeking more feature writers and columnists to help us out with some fun, unique, historical and interesting pieces about local subjects in coming months.

There are new grant opportunities to apply for and some retired journalists who might be willing to step in for a few weeks and cover stories here.

We’ll keep plugging away at producing copy that seeks to engage readers while documenting the interesting, diverse people who live here. We’ll strive to capture what a good place this is to do business, to get involved in the community and to get outdoors into beautiful settings.

We’ll also cover and point out challenges and problems, when merited, and we won’t forget to focus on solutions to those issues, and the important debates over remedies.

There is much going on in Marshall County right now and organizations such as our school districts, city and county governments, One-Marysville, Blue Rapids Community Action Team, Waterville Community Connections, Axtell, Frankfort, Vermillion, Beattie and Summerfield community efforts and new leadership at Marshall County Partnership for Growth are confronting challenges that face this area:

- Affordable, adequate housing for seniors, families and young adults;
- Affordable, healthy food supply and restaurants.
- More high-quality child care with well-paid childhood educators;
- Response to the suicide epidemic and affordable, accessible mental health support for all, regardless of income level;
- Sustainability of our medical facilities, most notably Community Memorial Healthcare;

• Solid state support for our public schools in light of declining enrollment;

• Better recreational facilities, such as Lakeview Sports Complex, Feldhausen Field, city parks and Alcove Spring Historic Park.

There’s no shortage of issues and work on Marshall countians’ table. Tackling them together as cities and as a county and school districts are what strengthen this area.

As Partnership for Growth board president Jeff Keating recently said, “We need to remember this isn’t just a county, it’s a county community.”

Important reminders: On page 4B of this week’s paper is a story about The Kansas Suicide Prevention Coalition and area churches who have planned a one-day, faith-based suicide prevention training workshop. David Umanzor of Soul Shop will lead the session on Nov. 3 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Lee Dam Center for Fine Art in Marysville. The training is open to all those concerned about suicide prevention.

Sarah Kessinger is editor and publisher of the Marysville Advocate.

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