***Editor's Note:*** *America’s Newspapers supports passage of the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, which was introduced July 16. It is critically important that newspapers across the country get involved and take action to encourage their Congressional representatives to support this legislation. Members are encouraged to publish this opinion piece and the accompanying editorial cartoon — or write their own editorial — to educate the public about this important issue.*

**A community with no local newspaper? That’s bad news**

**Dean Ridings
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What would my town be without a newspaper? If you haven’t asked yourself that question, perhaps it is time to consider just what the newspaper means to this community.

Because the doleful fact is, too many small towns and mid-sized cities are losing their newspapers right now. An [extensive study](https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/expanding-news-desert/loss-of-local-news/) from the University of North Carolina released in January found that by last year, 2,100 newspapers had disappeared, or almost 25% of the 9,000 newspapers published in 2004. That translates to 1,800 communities that 15 years ago had their own newspapers that now have no original local reporting, either in print or digital.

Note that this report was released just weeks before the coronavirus pandemic swept up newspapers in the same financial catastrophe that’s devastated businesses of all types and sizes and thrown millions out of their jobs and households into terrifying economic uncertainty.

What does a community lose when it loses its newspapers?

The most obvious is the community’s access to news about itself: The workings of its town hall; information about taxes and property values; the operation of schools for its children; the achievements, or the criminal activities, of local residents; the scores of local ball teams; schedules and reviews of movies, concerts, restaurants and books; and the offerings of local small businesses.

During this pandemic and in spite of their deep financial troubles, newspapers continue to provide the unique local news and information about COVID-19 — from testing spots to restrictions and openings to dining options — unavailable from any other source.

But the less obvious losses when a newspaper disappears may be the most devastating to a community.

Researchers in 2018 found that when a local newspaper closes, municipal borrowing costs — and therefore residents’ taxes — [go up.](https://www.governing.com/topics/finance/gov-newspapers-closure-costs-government.html) Why? Losing a paper, the study said, creates a “local information vacuum.” It turns out that lenders depend on local reporting to judge the value of government projects — and the officials in charge of them. Without that information, lenders tend to charge higher rates.

Communities without newspapers are also more likely to be victims of corruption petty and grand, local incidents the national media will never uncover. The [most glaring example](https://www.kentucky.com/opinion/op-ed/article237763604.html) comes from the small California city of Bell, where — without the eyes of a local newspaper on them — the city council engineered passage of a virtually unnoticed referendum to get around a new state law capping council member salaries. Within five years, council members were taking home a cool $100,000, the police chief was being paid $450,000 — and the city manager of this municipality of just 37,000 souls was making nearly $800,000.

Losing a local newspaper, another study found, can also lead to more [political polarization](https://apnews.com/ecf440606c824f9d9671f2fb22a2ffce) — something no community, nor our nation, needs now.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to avoid becoming another “news desert.” For one thing — subscribe.

But there is also pending bipartisan legislation that deserves your support. The Local Journalism Sustainability Act ([H.R. 7640](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7640/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22HR+7640%22%5D%7D&r=1&s=1)) provides for tax credits that support the three pillars of trusted, fair and accurate journalism: people who subscribe to newspapers or other local media; businesses that advertise in local newspapers; and newspapers that staff their newsrooms with journalists who cover the community. The tax credits aren’t permanent and sunset after five years.

In a nutshell, this bill would provide every taxpayer tax credits up to $250 a year to spend on subscriptions to qualified local newspapers. It would give businesses with fewer than 1,000 employees tax credits of up to $5,000 the first year and up to $2,500 for the next four years for advertising in local newspapers or local media. And it would give local newspapers a tax credit of 80% of its compensation to journalists in the first year and 50% for the next four years.

These are tax credits — not a handout, not a bailout. And the tax credits go away after five years. But this legislation provides a lifeline for everyone affected by the pandemic: local readers, local businesses, local news providers.

Asking your legislators in Washington to support the Local Journalism Sustainability Act is a simple step you can take to help your community from becoming yet another news desert. There’s a simple way to take that step, too: Just go to <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials> for contact information for your legislators. Your right to fair and trusted local news and information is worth the effort.

*On behalf of its approximately 1,500 newspaper and associate member companies, America’s Newspapers is committed to explaining, defending and advancing the vital role of newspapers in democracy and civil life. We put an emphasis on educating the public on all the ways newspapers contribute to building a community identity and the success of local businesses. Learn more:* [*www.newspapers.org*](http://www.newspapers.org)

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