

Pennsylvanians: Trust in local newspapers

New statewide survey also reveals strong support for public notices, Right-to-Know expansion as America marks National Newspaper Week

By Brad Simpson

Local newspapers are at the heart of communities across the commonwealth. Why? They are trusted sources for news Pennsylvanians cannot get anywhere else.

It really is that simple.

Long established on Main Streets in the boroughs, townships, counties and cities they serve, local newspapers report on tax hikes and business closings, new restaurants and farmland conservation, high school sports and fall apple festivals.

They announce graduations, weddings, anniversaries and births. Where else but in local newspapers do personal milestones share space with articles on public safety and investigations into unsafe drinking water?

Local journalism fosters a healthy, well-informed community – whether rural, suburban or citycentric -- and that good news is something to celebrate all year and especially Oct. 2-8, which is National Newspaper Week.

Pennsylvanians know the local journalism they need and want is ready for consumption 24/7. They look to local newspapers, in print and online, as well as locally based digital news outlets, all of which are also robust advocates and defenders of First Amendment freedoms. They entrust journalists to stand in their shoes and ask their questions: why a road is closed, when a special election will be held, how taxpayer dollars funded new school construction.

A statewide survey of Pennsylvania registered voters conducted in August by Public Opinion Strategies for the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association (PNA) found that 85% trust local newspapers in print and online, which is higher than other news media.

Moreover, Pennsylvania voters support newspapers' long-held role of printing public notices to alert citizens about important local issues like zoning changes, school closures, public meetings, foreclosures, and environmental proposals that impact health and property *before* government takes action. The survey revealed that 92% of Pennsylvania voters favor – 64% strongly -- current state law requiring public notices to be published in print newspapers.

The survey also found:

- 92% of Pennsylvania voters surveyed favor, 64% strongly, expanding the state Right-to-Know Law, which provides citizens the right of access to public records.

- 87% of Pennsylvania voters say, 49% strongly, that local newspapers are a key part of an informed community because of their coverage of local politics, public safety, high school sports teams, business openings and entertainment.
- 87% also believe, 45% strongly, that local newspapers help keep people connected to their community.
- 73% regard local newspapers as a more trustworthy source of information than social media posts.
- 68% of the Pennsylvanians surveyed say local newspapers are an important source for news during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- News about local government, school districts or county leadership are the topics respondents read about the most in their local newspapers.

Pennsylvanians' extraordinary levels of trust and reliance in local newspapers reflect a clear understanding that newspapers not only report on their communities, but that they are also part of them. In 2020 the statewide economic impact of the Pennsylvania newspaper industry was \$1.3 billion, according to a report released last year by PNA.

Local publishers pay taxes and hire community residents for their newsrooms, business offices, press rooms and delivery operations. Those employees, in turn, are homeowners and apartment dwellers who shop at the local grocery store, fill their tanks at the gas station around the corner, and walk their dogs in the community park. They are volunteer tutors, baseball coaches, food bank helpers.

Consider that in 2020 the combined impact of charitable giving and volunteerism from the Pennsylvania newspaper industry totaled \$6.4 million.

Moreover, local newspapers and digital news outlets across the commonwealth provide community forums of guest columns and letters to the editor. This is public space dedicated to differing perspectives, some lauded and others challenged, but all critical to the health of democracy and the shared hope of a better community.

Pennsylvanians' trust in local journalism continues to fuel newspapers' enduring commitment to reporting news that makes a positive difference in people's lives, now and in the decades to come.

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