

SOURCES AND BEATS: **RECONNECTING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY**

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RETHINK YOUR BEATS: INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Premise: You'll have a much better chance of getting any story – especially a more complete story – if you know your news sources and they know you. Take time to familiarize yourself with the key individuals and organizations on your beats in your communities. Think beyond the governing bodies.

A checklist:

- Introduce yourself to your beat, continue the discussion.
- Know who to talk to. Know the chain of command and the protocol. Likewise, introduce them to appropriate newspaper staff.
- Some organizations will have information officers, which can present opportunities and challenges. Develop a working relationship before a crisis hits.
- Broaden your beats beyond government. Think about those things that matter in the everyday lives of your readers, the things they are talking about at the coffee shop and dinner table – for example, the religious community, what is happening at the workplace, public safety in the broadest sense of the term.
- Rethink the way you cover traditional beats. For example, get into the classrooms and report the impact of decisions made by the school board.
- Make the point that community organizations should not forget – or shortchange – the local newspaper if they have news that warrants or generates statewide attention. Your argument is strongest if you have been regularly covering the organization. Discuss ways to satisfy needs of both the local newspaper and the agency's desire to get statewide attention.
- Tour the town on a regular basis. Names and places are at the heart of all stories. See the subjects of your stories firsthand.
- Don't forget informal networks. All communities have hot spots of conversation. One small-town publisher refers to the five Bs — bars, beauticians, barbers, butchers and bakeries. These contacts can be as important as those at the city hall, cop shop or courthouse.
- Be accessible. Provide after-hours contact information. This is especially important when dealing with law enforcement.
- Be sure you have the tools to deliver the news promptly on a variety of digital platforms.

GO BEYOND THE NEWSROOM

Premise: News organizations play a vital role in the everyday life of a community and its citizens by being the source of a variety of information. Be proactive in soliciting citizen comments and addressing questions about coverage.

Convene a readers board.

Invite and rotate a panel of citizens to regularly meet and evaluate the newspaper. Sessions can range from critiquing content to soliciting story ideas to identifying gaps in coverage.

Solicit perspectives for in-depth series.

Solid research is integral to any story, and that especially applies to stories and series that dig beneath the surface. Reporters should first talk with the stakeholders of a story, who can identify aspects they deem important to understanding a subject.

Insert “public” voice in editorials.

Large newspapers may have formal boards. At small newspapers, the publisher and/or editor may represent the editorial board. All newspapers can benefit from having one or two community representatives, rotating them on a regular basis similar to reader boards.

Open newsroom discussions.

Readers obviously forward ideas that are incorporated in everyday newsroom discussions. Why not take another step and open newsroom meetings so readers can witness firsthand the process for content and offer comments. Have a regular online “chat with editors.” Extending an invitation may be especially beneficial when planning special projects.

Identify and follow key influencers.

The digital world gives you the opportunity to bring the community to you at any time and any place. Find local bloggers, tweeters and other influencers on Facebook, Instagram and other social media avenues. Follow them and track what’s on their minds.

Preview, promote content.

Digital platforms provide an excellent venue to preview stories in the works. An editor’s blog gives readers a chance to submit ideas that might strengthen stories. It’s also a great tool for promoting circulation.

Explain your decisions.

There’s no better way to keep readers in the loop than through regular communication. A column by the editor and/or publisher should be standard on the editorial page – in addition to a timely blog.

Enlist a citizens panel.

Many newsrooms, no matter their size, are strapped for resources to present thorough coverage on a variety of issues. Select a citizens panel – representing a cross-section of your community’s demographics – and have them weigh in during the course of community discussion on important topics.

Establish editor/reporter blogs.

Newsrooms are the clearinghouse of community information. It places editors and reporters in excellent position to offer their insights. Many writers provide their perspectives with columns. Take this a step further – and make observations more immediate – with blogs.

Provide forum discussions.

Allow readers to not only participate in online discussions, but to start them as well by introducing topics. Your goal is to provide as many opportunities as possible for readers to engage in communitywide dialogue.

Convene brown bag lunches.

Invite citizens to offer their perspectives on various aspects of coverage. Topics can range from a discussion of general content to specific content such as business news.

Take your show on the road.

Convene a town meeting to ask citizens how you can better serve their needs. This is especially useful when trying to establish coverage in outlying communities.

Conduct a “call the editors” night.

Promote an evening when managers will be “on call” to answer any and all questions. Make it a point to answer questions on the spot or, if that’s not possible, to provide immediate follow-up to inquiries.

Premise: How are newspapers doing their jobs? There's no better way than sending a published story directly to readers and asking their feedback.

How are we doing our job? Please let us know

Red Wing Republican Eagle

Jim Pumarlo
Editor

Are Republican Eagle stories accurate?

Have you ever been pleased with a story but irritated by a headline?

Have we correctly conveyed your ideas and statements?

Our news staff translates hundreds of facts daily. Some we get firsthand; others we get secondhand. Some of them are included in comprehensive reports on an important community subject. Others are part of the daily churn of police reports, obituaries, weddings and engagements, and government meetings.

Through all of them, one tenet governs our work: accuracy. If the facts are wrong, the newspaper loses its credibility.

In the pursuit of fairness and accuracy, we are reinstituting a checkup sheet. Individuals who either are sources or subjects of news articles are the best judge of how we are doing our job. And we aim to ask them directly.

The process is straightforward. Each day we'll select a couple of articles from the paper and send a copy to an individual who we either contacted or who might have been identified in each story. Then we'll ask a series of questions. For example:

* Are facts in the story/photo accurate, including spelling of names and addresses?

* Were the quotes attributed to you used in proper context?

* In general, do you consider the Republican Eagle to be accurate?

Other miscellaneous questions will be asked as well. What are the most interesting sections of the paper? How could we improve service? Do other topics or issues warrant coverage?

Our goal is to solicit feedback from a range of readers – new and longtime residents, young and old, men and women – and from a geographic representation of our area.

We implemented this practice several years ago and found it most useful. The concerns or ideas identified on the questionnaires will reinforce what readers think we are doing right and will challenge us to improve areas where we are not meeting expectations.

We ask readers to be honest and straightforward in answers. Your feedback will direct us to a stronger product.

Of course, you don't have to wait to be asked. Readers rarely have been hesitant to offer their opinions on how we're doing our job. A telephone call always is welcome.

STORY CHECKLIST: WE VALUE YOUR OPINION

Please answer the questions below relating to the story enclosed. Send this sheet back in the enclosed postage-paid envelope. Thank you.

Date of story _____

Headline _____

Reporter's name _____

1) Are the facts in the enclosed story/photo caption correct, including spelling of names and addresses? _____

If not, please note any errors. _____

2) Is the headline correct? _____

If not, what is the problem? _____

3) Overall, is the story fair and did it convey the main points? _____

If not, what is unfair/missing? _____

4) Were the quotes attributed to you accurate? _____

If not, what was inaccurate? _____

5) Were quotes attributed to you used in proper context? _____

If not, explain the problem. _____

6) Were you contacted by a newspaper staff member in connection with this story? _____

7) Were you treated in a polite and professional manner? _____

If not, please describe. _____

8) In general, do you consider this newspaper to be accurate? _____

9) How does the newspaper best serve the community and you as a reader? Which parts of the newspaper do you find most interesting or helpful? _____

10) In what ways could the newspaper provide better service? _____

11) Are there related topics or other issues you believe the newspaper should be covering? _____

12) Do you subscribe to the newspaper? Yes ____ No ____

13) Do you read the newspaper online? Yes ____ No ____

Signed _____

Address _____

(Please use the back of this sheet or a separate letter for additional comments.)

DELIVERING MEANINGFUL MEETING COVERAGE, FOLLOW-UP

Premise: Newspapers devote significant resources on reporting public affairs. Reporting the votes and actions of governmental bodies is simply the first step. Remember, every action prompts a reaction. The most substantive stories are those that interpret for readers the practical impact of policy-making decisions. It's essential if you want to connect with readers.

A checklist:

- Avoid chronological reports. The first item on the agenda rarely is the most important, if it's even worth a mention. Don't feel obligated to report each and every item.
- Announcing that a group met is not a lead. The lead must summarize the most newsworthy aspect of what happened at the meeting.
- Identify the news. Write the headline and summary paragraph. It will help focus your writing and help the editors. If you don't know where you're going with the story, your readers will be lost as well.
- Put items in descriptive terms. Brighten your writing by making it understandable to readers. For example: "The city is looking to develop a three-acre parcel of land" or "The city is looking to develop a parcel of land about the size of three football fields."
- Help readers readily understand the impact of decisions. Reports are typically filled with numbers, and percentages can be meaningless. For example, 5-percent increase in garbage fees is better reported as dollar impact on households, retailers, manufacturers.
- Include voices of those affected. Deadlines might dictate a reporting only of the council action. Depending on the detail of advance coverage, provide follow-up stories on the impact of decisions. How will families be affected by higher extracurricular fees in schools? What's the impact of a city ordinance to eliminate all neon lights on storefronts?
- Reporting a meeting is the first task. Pay attention to presentation. Review agenda in advance to prepare graphics and photos. Break up coverage into stories and briefs; be aware of too many bulleted items. Place priority on meaningful headlines and crisp leads.
- Use digital editions. Web is useful on two fronts. It allows for immediate reports and places nondaily media on equal footing with daily competition. It has no space constraints and therefore allows for publication of variety of reports, speeches and detailed statistics.
- Track the issue. Prepare a summary paragraph of the issue that can be inserted in all stories. Track key dates and votes on the issue so information is readily available for background for you and other reporters in ongoing stories.
- Continuing coverage. Beats should include regular contact with appropriate officials.

DON'T REPORT THE MINUTES

Premise: If you report a meeting as if recording the official minutes, the stories will go unread.

Here's one example of how to drive readers away. This report of a City Council meeting presumably appeared on the front page. It began:

“Following the 4:30 p.m. meeting of the Committee of the Whole, the City Council met Monday night at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall. With no public hearings, bids, petitions, or open forum scheduled for the evening, the council quickly moved through the initial items.

“The following consent agenda items were approved by the council:

“Motion approving the minutes from the April 3, 2017 Council and Committee of the Whole meetings.

“Motion approving licenses.

“Resolution amending the 2017 fee schedule to include refuse container sanitizing charges.

“Resolution closing out debt service and capital project funds and transferring the balances.

“Resolution declaring items as surplus property and authorizing their disposal.

“After passing the consent agenda and a brief overview of two, updated city ordinances, the next resolution was for the council to voice their support to the state legislature to increase the budget for the Local Government Aid (LGA) grant program.”

PURSUE SECOND-DAY STORIES

Premise: Second-day stories serve a public purpose. They provide solid and substantive content for your newspaper. More important, they provide value and a service for readers – in other words, another way to connect with your readers.

A checklist:

- Spot news often prompts charges of sensational coverage. Seize the opportunity to provide coverage that looks beneath the surface of the circumstances.
- Broaden the conversation with individuals beyond those associated with the original news event.
- Explore the sidebar issues.
- Take the pulse of the community buzz. What are people talking about?
- Develop informal networks. Consider the five Bs – bars, beauticians, barbers, butchers and bakeries.
- Use the opportunity to reveal and reinforce facts and squelch rumors.
- Distinguish your coverage from that of “outside” media.
- Consider avenues for the editorial page – local editorials as well as guest commentaries including point/counterpoint.

SHORTCUTS: EXPLORE AND EVALUATE

Premise: Diminished newsroom resources and the lingering impact of COVID restrictions have forced newsrooms to seek efficiencies in gathering and reporting the news. Editors and reporters should evaluate shortcuts on two fronts: Are you really saving time in the long run? Do reports remain relevant to readers and advertisers?

A distinct danger is that news sources, especially those you connect with regularly, have become accustomed to reporting shortcuts and resist in-person, or even telephone, interviews.

Shortcut: We depend more on web streaming of government meetings.

Pros: Minimize travel time to and from meetings, as well as sitting through “dead time” of meetings.

Monitor those portions of meetings of highest community interest.

Ability to multitask while viewing meetings.

Ability to view meetings in delayed broadcast.

Cons: Potential technical difficulties.

How clear is audio?

More challenging to accurately record all votes, especially if they are voice votes.

More challenging to record basic information typically gathered at meetings, especially public members who are not regular attendees: i.e., full name and correct spelling; addresses, contact information for follow-up Q&A.

Without the ability to interact with the audience, reporters can easily fall into the trap of writing for “those in front of the room” instead of translating what actions and inactions mean for “those in back of the room.”

Shortcut: We depend more on the phone for interviews.

Pros: Maintain ability to gauge temperament of interviewees: i.e., cooperative, combative, evasive.

Ability for follow-up Q&A.

Easier to fit in interview in demanding schedules.

Interviews often can be scheduled outside of normal workday hours to accommodate reporter and interviewee.

Cons: More challenging to control environment of interview.

Easier for interviewee to cut short conversation or to refuse to answer uncomfortable questions.

Missed opportunity to capture elements essential to fleshing out feature stories: i.e., description of the scene, an individual’s body language.

Shortcut: We depend more on Zoom for interviews.

Pros: Face-to-face interview.

Opportunity for follow-up Q&A.

Cons: Potential technical difficulties.

Depending on who schedules Zoom session, interviewee may short-circuit the exchange by limiting length of session.

Shortcut: We depend more on email for interviews.

Pros: Interviewee typically has more time, greater flexibility to respond to questions.

Easier, more expedient to write up story versus sifting through notes from an interview.

An easy way to present some stories, especially profiles on individuals. Write an introduction, then follow with the email exchange.

Cons: Minimal or no opportunity to pose follow-up Q&A.

Responses often are published verbatim with no attempt at editing. Text is scripted and reads that way. Story has no conversational flow.

Q&As are often published in the exact order as the questions are asked. The lead is often buried; readers may never get to the crux of a story.

News sources, especially those you connect with regularly, may assume email interviews are the new norm and may increasingly reject requests for live interviews.

Answers often are written by a communications specialist with little or minimal review by the news source.

Shortcut: Some of us depend more on stringers/correspondents/freelancers.

Pros: A good stringer corps can effectively stretch newsroom resources.

Correspondents do not necessarily have to write a report ready for publication. Use them to collect essential information for a story. For example, at a government meeting, have them verify important votes, identify speakers and get spellings of their names, solicit on-the-spot feedback to an action or inaction.

You often can identify correspondents for a specific beat in which they have particular interest or expertise, thus minimizing your need to familiarize them with the topics.

Save money and stretch your newsroom budget.

Cons: Skill levels can vary greatly. Don't underestimate the extra work that may be required to turn their work into a solid report.

Correspondents may prove undependable, canceling out on an assignment at the last minute.

You have less control over their schedules, productivity as a correspondent versus employee.

Be cautious in hiring. Consider potential conflicts of interest such as hiring someone to cover city council who unsuccessfully ran for office.

BEST PRACTICES IN THE CHANGING NEWSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Premise: Newsrooms certainly have been forced to change and pivot some standard operating procedures in gathering and reporting the news. That does mean, however, abandoning the tenets of sound journalism. Newsrooms should regularly brainstorm how to achieve “best practices” in the changing newsroom environment to ensure reports are timely and relevant to their customers.

For example:

Meetings:

How much effort goes into previewing public hearings, meetings and other public events? Has this level of effort changed in recent times?

Is it OK to skip watching a city council, school board, county board meeting? If so, under what circumstances? How do you learn what happened if you don’t attend a meeting? How do you make sure you didn’t miss something important? What do you report about those meetings if you don’t attend them?

Evaluate the best approaches to address the three steps of coverage: Alert readers to a meeting; report the decisions; interpret what the actions and inactions mean for readers in their everyday lives.

Sports:

How has your sports coverage changed? Are you publishing game reports several days after they happen – and, if so – what is the value? Or are you publishing more feature stories accompanied by short game summaries/box score? If you have changed your sports coverage, what are your readers saying?

Features:

Are you publishing interesting and substantive feature stories as often as you once did? How about accompanying photos and graphics? Has the way you illustrated these stories changed?

Public safety:

Has your coverage of crime and courts evolved? Beyond the regular churn of statistics and reports, are you taking a broader look at public safety?

Private business rarely public business

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

Brian Brady of Hayward, Calif., is an unabashed admirer of Red Wing. Don't take our word; just read the letter to the editor elsewhere on this page.

It's one of the rare times readers will see such a letter published in this newspaper.

It was difficult to reject the letter. Brady's comments were genuine and extremely complimentary.

So why would we even consider withholding it? Commentary on private business – regardless of whether it's complimentary or critical – is typically not appropriate for public debate. The R-E's policy is consistent with that of most newspapers.

Most people would argue: What's wrong with such letters? Shouldn't the newspaper be a community booster?

We couldn't agree more, but it isn't quite that simple. If we publish favorable comments, fairness dictates that we print unfavorable comments, too.

We get our share of those. Hardly a week passes that somebody doesn't sound off with dissatisfaction regarding a local business. The source of the complaint might be a cold meal at a restaurant. Or an unfriendly clerk. Or disagreement with a store's return policy. Or a union's dispute with management.

We don't dismiss the complaints; we expect the concerns are genuine. But in most cases we suspect there are two sides to the story. We're afraid that once we let readers enter the fray, we'd be opening this page to a quagmire.

There are exceptions. We permit comments about private companies when it concerns a public issue. For example, a comment was published Tuesday in opposition to the Super Valu expansion as it relates to closing a street. And the proposed Red Wing Mall expansion is in the news as developers seek rezoning of land and tax-increment financing.

Even then, we are careful that readers don't stray from "public" issues.

Sometimes an issue with private business warrants public attention. We've printed two letters within the past couple of weeks regarding customer service. But readers will note that we were careful to keep the letters generic; no businesses were identified.

Indeed, it's tough to reject letters such as Brian Brady's. But it's necessary in nearly every case if we are to keep a level playing field.

Column: R-E, police cooperate on kidnap story

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

The Republican Eagle places priority on being first with local news – especially big news. That was the case once again with our front-page report Wednesday on the kidnapping and successful rescue of a 21-year-old woman.

But one thing was significantly different in tracking this story. The report was the first time readers were informed of the kidnapping, which took place Nov. 11, more than a week earlier, in the parking lot in downtown Red Wing.

We knew about the story earlier, including the involvement of the FBI. But we were asked not to pursue anything in deference to the safety of Janette Klein, 21. Family and authorities feared for her life if her alleged kidnapper got word that authorities were on her trail. The request was compelling, and we waited for a signal from Public Safety Director Rick Rabenort.

Rabenort initially called Monday to briefly describe the circumstances and asked us to hold the story. He updated us Tuesday morning. By that evening Klein was safe in custody, and authorities told their story Wednesday morning.

This newspaper prides itself on the pursuit of what is rightfully public information. And we've been recognized for those efforts by our peers. For three consecutive years we've won the Freedom of Information award from the Minnesota Associated Press Association.

In 1994, we chose to publish the names of two juveniles charged and eventually convicted in the murder of a rural Ellsworth couple – even though it meant we would be banned from the actual juvenile court proceedings.

In 1995, we tracked down and disclosed that former Goodhue County Attorney Gary Fridell was stripped of a judgeship due to a sexual relationship with his former office manager. The report was based on an anonymous source. A federal judge upheld our right to keep the identity secret.

In 1996, we published the name of a Red Wing athlete suspended for two games due to a violation of Minnesota State High School League rules. The coach and team “boycotted” us by not speaking to our reporter for one game until we publicly explained our position.

Our insistence on full disclosure of the sports suspensions also was noted last month when the R-E was awarded second place for editorial excellence by the Inland Press Association among newspapers under 10,000 circulation.

And in recent years, the newspaper has received special citations from both the Minnesota Newspaper Association and the Society of Professional Journalists for overall efforts to preserve the freedom of information.

So, more often than not, when someone tries to withhold public information, we redouble our efforts to get it.

But rights are accompanied by responsibilities. In the case of the kidnapped woman, we had an obligation to ensure that our zeal to report the news would not cause her injury. Through cooperation with Red Wing police, the woman was returned to safety and we still were first with the report.

This time, privacy outweighs right to know

Red Wing Republican Eagle

Jim Pumarlo

Editor

Our front page Monday carried a report of a 7-week-old boy who was revived after suffering cardiac arrest. The “heroes” included foster parents John and Sarah Robinson of Red Wing along with Lt. Randy Smith who was first to arrive at the house. Scott Jackson, Randy Olson and Doug Rogers also were among those who responded.

One name was purposely absent from the article – the name of the child, who was under foster care. We also didn’t publish the child’s name in the ambulance runs printed on the FYI page.

In this case, we decided the potential hurt to the natural parent outweighed the public’s right to know the identity of the infant. We made the decision after speaking with personnel at Goodhue County Social Services.

The Republican Eagle has a strong tradition of aggressive reporting. In most cases, if information is a public record, it is published.

But the right to publish public records carries an accompanying responsibility. On rare occasions, we’ll withhold information. This was one of those cases.

Our reticence stemmed from the fear that one or more of the child’s parents might be living in the area. Identifying the child, who was born with medical problems, would raise the obvious question among acquaintances of the family: Why was the boy not in his parents’ home?

Welfare Director Sam Jacobson confirmed our suspicion. In nearly all cases foster children are placed with families in the home county. That was true here as well; one of the youth’s natural parents lives in Goodhue County.

In the final analysis, we asked ourselves whether we still had a compelling story without identifying the child.

As Jacobson said, “It was a great story. They (the crew) did a terrific job.”

We continue to be vigilant regarding public information and the needs of readers. As always, though, we base decisions on the merits of each case.

Dos and don'ts for public officials

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo

Editor

In Minnesota, elected and appointed officials live in a fishbowl. Translated, nearly all of their actions are subject to public scrutiny.

To paraphrase the advice of Scott T. Anderson and Jay. T. Squires: If something doesn't feel right - if there's hesitancy that a discussion among elected officials at an informal gathering instead should be done around the table in formal session - don't do it. Otherwise, it might be a violation of the state's Open Meeting Law.

It's no surprise that the R-E endorses the counsel. More surprising, however, is the fact that Anderson and Squires often find themselves as adversaries to the press, arguing why it's appropriate for public bodies to conduct certain business behind closed doors.

Anderson and Squires are with Ratwik, Roszak & Maloney in Minneapolis, the law firm recently named to represent the city of Red Wing. Last week, Anderson and Squires conducted an orientation for members of boards and commissions. The topics were public meeting procedures, liability exposure for elected and appointed officers, the Open Meeting Law, and ethics in government and the Minnesota gift law.

Discussion on the Open Meeting Law caught our attention in particular, and so we attended the orientation. We found ourselves nodding in agreement for the lion's share of the counsel.

Certain aspects of the law prompt the most questions, and this session was no different. Some points made by the legal counsel are worth repeating:

- All meetings are presumed open unless exceptions are provided in the law.
- The law applies to all meetings of the governing body and, in general, meetings of its commissions, boards, committees and subcommittees.
- A meeting, for purposes of the law, is defined as a "gathering of a quorum or more members of the governing body ... at which members discuss, decide or receive information as a group on issues relating to the official business of that governing body."
- "Chance social gatherings," even though a quorum of the public body is present, are not covered by the law. But the social gathering cannot be used for the purposes of conducting official business unless notice requirements of the law are satisfied.

Not all distinctions are as clear cut when discussing the Open Meeting Law. An area that we remain vigilant with all public bodies is the citing of "attorney-client privilege" and "threatened litigation" to go into closed session.

The different exceptions were written into law for very specific purposes, but some public bodies have taken more and more latitude in citing these as reasons for cause to close a meeting.

A Supreme Court decision is expected soon on the attorney-client exception involving a closed meeting by the Prior Lake City Council which was contested by the Prior Lake American newspaper. The ruling promises to give further definition to the privilege.

Too often public bodies attempt to close meetings to be "safe" or because they "think" it's the right thing to do. That doesn't pass legal muster.

We're not so naive to believe that we'll align every time with Anderson and Squires when it comes to interpretation of the Open Meeting Law and the Data Practices Act. But it's helpful when both sides argue their cases from a common understanding of the law.

Column: Look for regular updates from Supt. Kelly Smith

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

What's the impact of this year's legislative budget-balancing bill on Red Wing Schools?

Is the Profile of Learning having the desired results?

Is there any easy answer to financing of schools in light of declining enrollments?

These are among the myriad issues facing public schools, and they all will provide fodder for a new column on this page. Red Wing Supt. Kelly Smith will write a monthly article that will make its debut next week.

The need for better communication among the schools and their many constituencies has been underscored several times in recent years. It was identified once again in the district's recently completed strategic planning and the Community Conversations projects sponsored last month by the Duff Endowment Fund.

The recurring message prompted Smith to approach the R-E with the idea of a regular report by the superintendent.

Ground rules

The column is accompanied by ground rules:

- The column will be an avenue to elaborate on issues facing the district. It will not be a stage to respond to comments expressed through editorials, letters to the editor or People's Platform. Those replies will be via letters to the editor.
- The column will be a voice for the superintendent. School Board members, if they wish to comment on subjects, have the standard avenues available to other readers.
- The column will be subject to the same review and editing as all other articles offered for publication. That does not mean censorship. Smith has free reign to express his opinions, even if they are contrary to ideas advanced by this newspaper.
- The column will not be a substitute for press releases from the district. For example, it's fine if Smith wishes to expand on the district's position on busing. But his first public statements on the issue appropriately belong in a news story.
- The column will not be a tool to give schools "good PR." If school personnel have an idea for a story, they always are welcome to contact our news department. The ideas for school articles – all articles for that matter – are judged on individual merits.

Community discussion

The bottom line, however, is that we believe the column will be a solid addition to this page and to discussion of issues vital to the community. The R-E places great emphasis on coverage of education, but we are limited in space and resources to publish everything that might be discussed at a meeting or submitted to us. And, in some cases, a subject might warrant additional explanation.

Smith will have the opportunity to pursue those things and more in his column. Look for the first one Tuesday.

Column: Ground rules for political campaigns

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

The election season is in full swing, and nowhere is it busier than locally. Several races are guaranteed to attract readers' attention – from the U.S. Senate race and the candidacy of Red Wing's Joanel Dyrstad to the crowded contests in Goodhue County where 13 candidates are vying for two commissioners' seats.

The campaign season also means a flurry of press releases and letters to the editor. Our FAX machine has been in a constant whirl the past several weeks, and not a week passes without some candidate wanting to stop by and promote a campaign.

Our goal is to keep readers abreast of as many campaigns as possible through Associated Press and staff reports. The greatest attention will naturally be given to local candidates and local races.

The first step is the September primary elections. We've divided the contests in Minnesota and Wisconsin among our three primary "beat" reporters – Anne Jacobson, Karl Puckett and Ruth Nerhaugen. Coverage will encompass written answers to questions and live interviews.

A Voters Guide will augment our coverage for the November general election.

We'll try to give a flavor of the candidate as a person as well as relay positions on a variety of issues.

That's especially important where a flurry of candidates came forward, particularly during the last few days before the filing deadline. In addition, many of these people are relatively unknown to the broad-based voting public.

Candidate forums will be considered on a case-by-case basis for coverage. Often the issues raised there are the same we've addressed in our own interviews.

In similar fashion, we evaluate press releases on their individual merits. Candidates who send releases on a weekly basis just to keep their names in the news likely will not see many published.

Those organized campaigns are more appropriately handled with paid advertising.

We encourage candidates and their staffs to call if they're unclear about our policies and procedures. Laying the ground rules up front will lead to fewer misunderstandings in the heat of campaigning.

JIM PUMARLO

Community newspapers, at their best, are stewards of their communities. The news columns are a blend of stories that people like to read and stories they should read. The advertising columns promote and grow local commerce. And the editorial pages are a marketplace of ideas.

Jim Pumarlo understands that energized newspapers are at the foundation of energized communities. His message is straightforward: Community newspapers – whether delivering information in the print or on digital platforms – must focus on local news if they are to remain relevant to their readers and advertisers.

His seminars and training workshops are practical and interactive, including handouts that participants can use to tailor policies and procedures to their operations. In addition to his standard menu of seminars, he works with newspapers to provide custom training for their needs, including individual writing critiques.

He worked 27 years at daily newspapers in International Falls and Red Wing, Minn., the last 21 years as editor at Red Wing. In 2005, he was given the Al McIntosh Distinguished Service to Journalism Award by the Minnesota Newspaper Association. He was responsible for daily editorials and also wrote a weekly column, often responding to reader questions. His column was a consistent winner in MNA's annual Better Newspaper Contest for "best explanation of news operations or ethics." His editorials and the overall editorial page were recognized in competition sponsored by the MNA and Inland Press Association. In 1998, the Republican Eagle won first place in Best of the States competition for daily newspapers under 10,000 circulation by the National Newspaper Association.

He resigned in 2003 and served 16 years as director of communications and media relations at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, the state's largest business advocacy organization.

He released a book in 2005, "Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper." His second book, Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Campaign Coverage," was released in 2007. His third book, "Journalism Primer: A Guide to Community News Coverage for Beginning Journalists," was released in 2011.

He remains involved in the MNA as a member of its Journalism Education and Legislative committees. He is a former member of the Minnesota News Media Institute, the training arm of the MNA. He served on the hearing panel for the Minnesota News Council, which promoted fair, vigorous and trusted journalism by engaging the news media and the public in examining standards of fairness.



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