

Commentary: An existential threat to Kentucky's community newspapers

By Scott White
Woodford Sun

Community journalists across Kentucky are raising alarms about House Bill 368, which would end a requirement to publish legal notices in local newspapers. The measure cleared the Kentucky House 62-30 on Feb. 26.

Jane Ashley Pace, immediate past president of the Kentucky Press Association and publisher of *The Oldham Era* and the *Henry County Local*, recently wrote that HB 368 would decrease government transparency and could cost some smaller, rural counties their local newspaper.

The following is an edited version of a column published in the *Woodford Sun* written by Sun managing editor Scott White.

Just when you think things are turning around. . .

The Kentucky General Assembly is considering House Bill 368, which, if passed into law, would pose a very real threat to the *Woodford Sun's* ability to stay open. Let me explain.

As many of you know from prior columns, we here at the *Sun* have been laser-focused on saving this county's 156-year-old voice from extinction. This is not crying wolf — community newspapers in Kentucky and around the country have been failing

at a steady rate.

The Sun has not turned a profit since 2015. We are a bare bones staff. Even so, our publisher Ben Chandler is committed to keeping this newspaper locally owned, locally focused and open. We are the sole source of Woodford County hard news, features, community doings, local sports and you name it. Everything we print is relevant to anyone living or doing business in or enjoying Woodford County.

Even being small, I am pretty proud of the job we do, and based on what many of you call, text or email me or stop and tell me, most folks agree.

I can't tell you how many folks have stopped me to say, "You guys can do it, we need the *Sun*. Don't sell or close. *The Sun* is indispensable."

Many of you have renewed for two years. Many seniors ignore the discount price and pay the full amount. Some of you have increased the number of times you advertise — or increased the number of times you run an ad.

Thank you.

And, according to data from the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, there are a lot of you out there supporting the *Sun*.

The institute reports out of 120 community newspapers in Kentucky, we are 30th in

community penetration at 29% — which represents the percentage of residents who read our paper. This is calculated by totaling the average in-county mail and single-copy sales numbers on our annual postal statement and dividing that total by the number of housing units, a datum that is updated annually by the Bureau of the Census. This means a third of this county's population regularly reads the *Sun*.

And though our advertising revenues are not what they were even five years ago, they are improving. You accepted without complaint an increase in the cost from 75 cents to a dollar. Subscriptions, both new and renewals, are up.

Now, about HB 368.

HB 368, sponsored by Rep. Jennifer Decker, R-Waddy, and awaiting action in the Senate, would allow local governments and others to remove legal notices from newspapers and place them on government websites. These are things like notices of meetings, proposed ordinances, master commissioner sales, estate filings, utility rate increases; just turn to our classified page and you will see some.

We don't make a ton of money off of these, but this does account for a portion of our revenue. The possible

loss of this, now, is a real threat, and we are nearly there. Sadly, many of our colleagues around the state are in even worse shape, where the loss of this revenue would put them out of business.

Though I get and hear the criticisms of the media, the reality is do you really want to live in a country without a free and independent press? Let me be more specific. Should residents of Letcher County have to live without the award-winning *Mountain Eagle*? Or, Georgetown without the *News-Graphic*? Or, Frankfort without the *State Journal*? Or, Versailles and Midway without the *Woodford Sun*?

That said, it's important to also remember there are public policy reasons with roots in the free press provisions of the federal and Kentucky constitutions for governments to be required to publish certain matters in the newspaper and not just on government websites. Placing legal notices in newspapers increases transparency, holds public officials accountable, and decreases the risk of mischief by those officials and bureaucrats.

When a legal ad is placed

in a newspaper, it is placed in the local newspaper, it is dated, and cannot be changed after the fact. In addition, it is placed on a website managed by the Kentucky Press Association where all legal notices in Kentucky can be found easily at kypublicnotices.com. When the *Sun* publishes a legal notice, it is in the paper, on our website and on the digital paper.

HB 368 seeks to have entities including county and city governments place public notices on their own websites, yet many have only one employee, if any, and often can't keep their current websites updated.

As good as the new sites run by the City of Versailles and Woodford County are, they are managed by just one or maybe two employees who have myriad other responsibilities. Is it reasonable to expect a local government, even as good and responsible as we have, to make sure required legal notices are posted and maintained in a timely fashion? Given the risk of mischief, is it worth it?

I suspect some of you know who Al Cross is; he made his name as both a state government reporter for

the *Courier-Journal* where he became a columnist and then as the executive director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky, from where he just recently retired. Al is also considered one of the most informed, keen and present observers of Kentucky politics and is a regular on KET's election night coverage. Al is also a good friend of mine and Ben's, a very good friend and subscriber of the *Sun*, and someone whom I regularly solicit for his views and thoughts on how we operate.

Here is what Al recently emailed me about HB 368, "All in all, (last week's edition of the *Sun*) was a newspaper that could be an excellent vest-pocket argument against HB 368, which would lead to the death of some Kentucky newspapers by allowing local governments to post public notices on their websites instead of local newspapers — which once got maybe 7 (percent) to 8 percent of their revenue from public notices but are now likely in the neighborhood of 20 percent."

Well, we aren't 20%, but it's north of 7%.

DECLARATION

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calling 800-621-FEMA (3362) or by using the FEMA App. Anyone using a relay service, such as video relay service (VRS), captioned telephone service or other similar service, can give FEMA the number for that service.

Beshear said the number of people who lost their lives in the statewide flooding had risen to 23.

"Sadly, our death toll today has now climbed to 23," he said. The newest fatality was identified as an adult male in Grant County.

Beshear termed it one of the biggest disasters

he's had to deal with during his five years in office, saying it only ranks behind the tornado outbreak of 2021 and the flooding of 2022.

Several area Emergency Management officials and other emergency response officials comprising an Incident Management Team (IMT) spent last week at the Kentucky Emergency Operations Center in Frankfort to assist in the efforts as part of a pilot project to provide work relief to state workers.

Lewis County Emergency Management Director Dennis Brown was one of those included in

the deployment and served in the capacity of Situation Unit Leader, working with other IMT members as well as Kentucky Emergency Management and Federal Emergency Management Agency officials in providing support to local officials and relief workers in affected counties.

Gov. Beshear said they are still accepting contributions to The Team Kentucky Storm Relief fund to aid those impacted by the severe weather systems, including funeral expenses. You can help by making a donation online. Just go to Teamkystormrelieffund.ky.gov.

TORNADO

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situational awareness by monitoring the weather on weather.gov, watching local TV, or listening to NOAA Weather Radio.

- Flying debris is the greatest danger in tornadoes, so store protective coverings such as a mattress, sleeping bags, thick blankets, etc., at or near your shelter space, ready to use on a few seconds' notice.

- Put as many walls and floors between you and the tornado as possible.

- If you are in a mobile home, get out. Go to a neighbors, underground shelter, or a nearby permanent structure.

- When a tornado warning is issued, go to your



Tornado Siren Test
Tollesboro
Garrison
Firebrick
Black Oak
Vanceburg
**Wednesday
March 5
10:07 a.m.**
Test will be canceled in the event of bad weather.

basement and stay away from windows. If you have no basement, go to a small interior room like a bathroom or closet on the lowest floor and crouch

down. Even in an interior room you should cover yourself with thick padding to protect against falling debris, such as the ceiling or roof.



QUARTER AUCTION for MJ Hawks

MJ has been diagnosed with Stage 4 Metastasis Lung Cancer. All proceeds go to MJ.

Saturday, March 22, 2025

Lewis County High School Cafeteria

79 Lions Lane, Vanceburg

Enter Thru Front of School, Follow Signs

**Doors Open 4:00 p.m. with Food Being Served
Auction Starts at 5:00 p.m.**

BRING YOUR QUARTERS & INVITE FRIENDS

If you would like to donate, please contact Susan Gilbert at 606-748-0640, Greta May 606-465-5156, or Crystal Flannigan at 606-541-2430.

All Donations Appreciated.



TOGETHER WE CAN HELP

OPEN DONATION FOR FLOOD DISASTER RELIEF

Scan the QR-Code below to be taken to an Amazon wish list with items needed. Items that are not on the wish list can also be purchased and sent through the wish list directly to Flood Relief Centers in that area.



Perry County
[HTTPS://BIT.LY/3EIKYWD](https://bit.ly/3EIKYWD)



Floyd County
[HTTPS://BIT.LY/3CY3S15](https://bit.ly/3CY3S15)



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[HTTPS://BIT.LY/4GNWDGX](https://bit.ly/4GNWDGX)

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