<u>LEGISLATIVE UPDATE</u> - With Representative Mitchum Whitaker The dual mandate: Legislating AI for safety and opportunity



Ren Mitch Whitake

AI-augmented governance is a bold proposition, and administrators and officials must consider the social, political, and legal aspects before moving forward. Last year, the House Speaker and Senate President directed the creation of the Artificial Intelligence Task Force to study how AI could help state government and Kentuckians, as well as what risks it might bring. That panel worked through the 2024 interim, gathering information, studying potential opportunities, and targeting how the state laws can be used to address AI.

The task force's work led to the passage of SB 4, Kentucky's first real AI policy. This bill legally defines

basic AI terms and directs the Commonwealth Office of Technology to create rules for using AI. The goals are to support new ideas, protect personal data, and teach people about AI. It also sets rules for how state agencies use AI, including requirements for sharing when AI is used, keeping records, and watching for problems like AI-generated misinformation in elections.

However, the task force's work is far from over as AI-technology continues to evolve. Legislative leadership directed the recreation of the task force to meet during this interim. The task force is charged to examine existing applications, foster innovation and competitiveness, promote AI literacy, and ensure responsible AI development and governance. Through this work, Kentucky can become a leader in AI innovation, policy reform, and informed advocacy.

What is AI?

Artificial Intelligence is a type of computer program that helps machines make decisions like humans. Older examples include ATMs, search engines, and voice assistants. Newer AI systems are more advanced — they can write essays, analyze pictures, and predict trends. This is often called "generative AI," which can create text, images, videos, or even code. Programs like ChatGPT, Claude, and Microsoft Copilot are examples of this technology.

Innovation and Limitations

AI has many possible benefits. In healthcare, it could help doctors diagnose illnesses faster and reduce paperwork. In schools, AI might help teachers plan lessons and give students personalized tutoring. However, there are risks. These include the potential to spread false information, deepfakes, and ethical questions about fairness

and privacy.

Data Centers

Every internet search, photo upload, and ChatGPT query relies on a physical home: a data center. Now, as AI and cloud services grow, companies are constructing more data centers to meet the demand. Last year, Kentucky joined the competition to recruit such centers by offering tax incentives to companies looking for locations to build. However, local governments must be prepared to address data centers with the appropriate local ordinances, and utilities have to be ready to meet their needs.

Governance and Regulation

While AI can be an amazing tool, in many cases we have no idea how they make decisions. This is commonly referred to as the "black box problem." And, let's face it – it feels a little like unleashing Frankenstein. Additionally, AI models follow the rule of "garbage in, garbage out." If the data they learn from is biased or otherwise incorrect the results will be too, and those results can look fair or accurate even when they are not. Data privacy risks with AI include unauthorized collection of sensitive information, unchecked surveillance, and potential breaches.

Banning or heavily limiting AI could cause as much harm as good. Instead, it is better to create clear rules that focus on transparency (being open about how AI is used) and accountability (making sure someone is responsible for its decisions). One way to do this is with "Human in the Loop" systems, which essentially means a person is always involved at important steps to check the AI's work and make final decisions.

Rather than trying to block AI development, the state can guide it by setting clear goals, choosing trustworthy partners, and writing strong contracts so the technology grows in ways that benefit the public. The legislative task force will continue working towards these goals as we work on the agenda for the 2026 Regular Session. To follow along, visit the Committees section on legislature's website and click Special Committees. Recorded meetings are also available on the legislature's YouTube page, @LRC Committee Meetings.

As always, I can be reached anytime through the toll-free message line in Frankfort at 1-800-372-7181. You can also contact me via email at Mitchum. Whitaker@kylegislature.gov and keep track through the Kentucky legislature's website at legislature.ky.gov.

Illinois Publisher Shuts Down Dozens of Local Newspapers Across Midwest and West

Dozens of small-town communities across the Midwest and West lost their local newspapers Thursday after Illinois-based News Media Corp. (NMC) abruptly announced it would shut down due to financial troubles.

The company, headquartered in Rochelle, Illinois, is closing 14 papers in Wyoming, seven in Illinois, five in Arizona, four in South Dakota, and one in Nebraska. Long known as "the voice of small town America," NMC's closure wipes out longstanding publications that, in many cases, were the primary — and sometimes only — source of local news.

The move deepens the growing crisis of "news deserts" in rural America. According to the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, the U.S. has lost more than one-third of its print newspapers and two-thirds of its newspaper journalists since 2004.

In a letter to employees, CEO J.J. Tompkins cited a combination of industry-wide economic decline, falling revenue, rising costs, and the collapse of a potential sale. "We have reached a point where continuing business is no longer feasible," he wrote. Hundreds of employees were immediately laid off, with a promise that the company would make "reasonable efforts" to pay remaining wages.

The announcement blindsided staff. "No one... knew this was coming today," said Benjamin Chase, managing editor of the Huron Plainsman in South Dakota. "We're all in shock and attempting to figure out how to move forward." Josh Linehan, managing editor of the Brookings Register, told readers the closure was "no secret" in the sense that the industry has been struggling — but blamed the shutdown on "poor corporate management."

The loss of the Register is a major blow to Brookings, a city of about 25,000. Mayor Ope Niemeyer said it leaves a gap in civic life and public information, particularly for older residents who don't rely on social media. Legal notices, local commentary, and community reporting — once central to the city's discourse — are now gone.

"It brings the community together," Niemeyer said. "It's an entity that's going to be irreplaceable."

Teri Finneman, a journalism professor at the University of Kansas and publisher of The Eudora Times, said the shutdown reflects broader structural problems in local journalism. She cited outdated business models, reluctance among the public to pay for news, shrinking rural populations, and corporate owners unfamiliar with running small papers.

"This needs to be a wake-up call," Finneman warned. "Your newspaper could be at risk as well. It's incumbent upon people to support their newspapers through subscriptions and advertising if we're going to keep critical news in these communities."

In the wake of the closures, the Sioux Falls-based Dakota Scout announced plans to expand coverage into Brookings.

Got Something To Say?

The *Tri-City News* welcomes Commentary and Letters to the Editor from our readers. We believe in the value of the right free speech, and work each day to preserve it, not just for our newspaper, but for all citizens. Our republic depends upon it.

All Commentary or Letters to the Editor should be signed by the person submitting it along with a contact phone for us to verify your identity. We ask that you keep your comments focused on the issue of your concern and refrain from personal attacks. We reserve the right to refuse to print anything that we deem to be unsuitable for our family publication.

Feel free to contact us at anytime at our new telephone number which is **606-508-5223**. Anything you wish to submit for publication by be done so through email at: tricitynews@yahoo.com, or tina.superiorprinting@gmail.com.

