

As some newspapers struggle, local news is harder to find in Virginia

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL
For Foothills Forum

It is, unfortunately, old news.

Virginia's newspapers, the single biggest source of local news, face unprecedented challenges, with their readers, revenues and staffs steadily dwindling.

People still hear about bickering in Congress and mysterious Chinese balloons overhead. What they learn less about is what's going on in their own backyards, towns, schools, counties and state capitals.

Some 2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005, over-reliant on advertising-dependent business models that cratered in the rise of the Internet. Most were weeklies.

The casualties as of September 2022 included 42 Virginia newspapers, according to researchers with the State of Local News Initiative, at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

That doesn't include several weeklies that closed since January, including the *Chesterfield Observer*, the *Shenandoah Valley-Herald* and the *Washington County News*, nor the *Mechanicsville Local* and the *Virginian Review*, which merged with sister papers, according to the Library of Virginia.

Virginia now has about 20 dailies and 100 weeklies, not counting specialized publications.

Those still standing have suffered deep staff cuts. Big papers have retreated from parts of Virginia they used to cover. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk once had print circulations approaching 200,000. Now, counting both print papers and replicas read online, they stand at 57,695 and 51,284 respectively, according to the Alliance for Audited Media.

"People aren't really aware of the extent to which traditional journalism, with a set of values and proper procedures, has wilted away," said Clark Hoyt, retired vice president of now-vanished Knight Ridder Newspapers. "You don't have people covering school boards, city and county commissions, courthouses and police departments on a regular basis."

Local news coverage is "absolutely critical for democracy," said Melody Barnes, executive director of the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy and former director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama.

Without reporters' showing up, "who is tending to the issues ... critical to life in [that] community?" asked Barnes.

With the nonprofit Foothills Forum providing expanded and explanatory news coverage for readers of the local weekly newspaper, tiny Rappahannock County has bucked the trend for going on nine years. Much of the rest of Virginia isn't as fortunate. The Virginia Humanities council, the Karsh Insti-



NEWS ABOUT LOCAL NEWS
An urgent search for solutions as local news faces challenges

With little awareness among Virginians themselves, the Old Dominion has seen a steady erosion in the staffing and delivery of local news over two decades. For two years, Virginia Humanities and the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy have worked with local journalists to better understand how to meet Virginia's news needs. With support from Knight Foundation, the American Press Institute, Piedmont Journalism Foundation, PATH Foundation, Foothills Forum and others, the organizers of the April 20-21 Local News Summit have produced a series of stories made available for newspapers and news websites to publish around the state. This public service project profiles Virginia journalists and involves national, state and local partners including practitioners, academics, funders, students and policymakers.

TODAY | Virginia's local news crisis: Some of Virginia's newspapers – still the primary providers of local news – are in trouble, bleeding readers, revenues and reporters. The loss threatens democracy itself.

► For an expanded version of today's report, go to rappnews.com/localnews

Coming in May

PART 2 | The innovators: Virginians are filling the news vacuum in interesting ways, from digital sites and podcasts to nonprofit content providers.

PART 3 | The BIPOC/special interest news ecosystem: Who is meeting the news needs of Virginia's eclectic communities and special interest groups – historically, culturally, journalistically? Big state, many interests, fewer reporters.

tute and Foothills Forum are convening an April 20-21 summit in Richmond on the crisis. Nonprofit media pioneer Evan Smith, Karsh's inaugural practitioner fellow, will deliver the public keynote.

News deserts

Two-thirds of the nation's 3,143 counties have no daily paper, according to the State of Local News. The presses have stopped rolling at more than a quarter of the newspapers that existed in 2005 and some of the 6,380 surviving papers are "ghosts" with skeleton staffs, according to Penelope Muse Abernathy, a Medill visiting professor.

The State of Local News said 205 U.S. counties – affecting 70 million Americans – were "news deserts" where coverage of local institutions is insufficient. Five were in Virginia: Buckingham, Caroline, King George, King and Queen, and Surrey.

But Betsy Edwards, executive director of the Virginia Press Association, said, "There's still coverage going on in most every place in the Commonwealth.... Circulations continue to go down for print, but they are through the roof online."

If people want news "in new and different ways, then newspapers need to meet them there," she said. "They need to push it out on a website, through email blasts, and whatever else."

The *Henrico Citizen* illustrates this. COVID-19 helped kill the print edition of the twice-a-month *Henrico Citizen*, which Tom Lappas launched in 2001. At its peak, the *Citizen* distributed 20,000 free copies across Henrico County. But he printed his last paper on St. Patrick's Day 2020.

Lappas continues to aggressively report the local news online—and attracts 65,000 readers a month on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. He splits the salary of his one reporter with Report for America, a nonprofit modeled after Teach for America that places novices at newspapers that need help. He also runs stories by students at the University of Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Taking a cue from public radio, Lappas launched a campaign last summer to entice 500 followers to contribute \$75 or \$150 a year to keep the *Citizen* going. He is a third of the way.

What's lost: Voting, citizenship

Researchers have documented that with the loss of local news, citizens are less likely to vote, less politically informed, and less likely to run for office.

Political scientists Danny Hayes of George Washington University and Jennifer L. Lawless of the University of Virginia wrote in their 2021 book, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*: "As struggling newspapers have slashed staff, they have dramatically cut their coverage of mayors, city halls, school boards, county commissions, and virtually every aspect of local government." Cuts in local coverage were worst at the smallest papers, they found.

Leaders on the front lines



Five profiles of the editors and publishers bringing Virginians the news: Anne Adams, Monterrey, *above*; Gregg Glassner, Caroline County; Carlos Santos, Fluvanna; Billy Coleburn, Blackstone; Stan R. Hale, Roanoke.

► Read their stories at rappnews.com/leaders

The search for new models

The remedy does not seem to lie in the once-reliable ways of the industry.

In 2020, for the first time, U.S. newspapers brought in less revenue from advertising (\$9.6 billion) than circulation (\$11 billion). Five of the 10 largest newspaper companies are owned by hedge funds or other investors, according to the Associated Press. Hedge funds are notorious for selling off the papers' real estate and slashing staffs.

Younger Americans never acquired the habit of reading newspapers. Even older readers, who are more likely to subscribe, now often pay for less expensive digital access.

In 1987, daily newspaper circulation peaked at nearly 63 million. In 2020 it barely topped 24 million.

Roughly a half-dozen nonprofit news organizations and foundations have sprung up in Virginia to help plug the gaps. Most rely on donations. They include:

► Foothills Forum has collaborated with the *Rappahannock News* since 2015, raising local support that has allowed the *News* to produce in-depth stories regularly. VPA named the paper the best weekly of its size last year.

► The online *Virginia Mercury*, based in Richmond, which covers state government, politics and policy. Launched in 2018, it is an affiliate of States Newsroom, a network of similar news nonprofits in 33 states.

► *Cardinal News*, an online nonprofit covering Southwest and Southside Virginia with a news staff of 10 and a budget of \$1.3 million.

See **NEWS**, Page 24

Nationwide newspaper woes hit state

Newspapers suffered a series of blows over the decades, including the rise of television news channels, Craigslist's capture of classified ads, and the desertion of department stores and other businesses that found that their display ads were no longer delivering results.

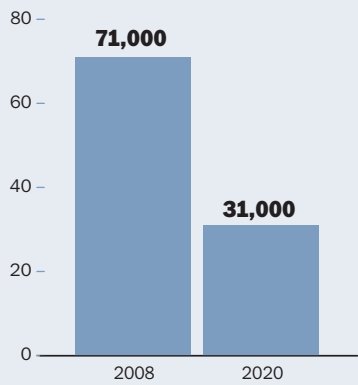
Newspapers are still struggling to generate sufficient ad revenues from their websites, but online ad sales aren't as lucrative and many readers expect content for free.

Some family-owned dailies and weeklies had to sell because of deaths, divorces or lack of interested heirs. Newspaper chains with long roots in the news business purchased some, but others have been snapped up by hedge funds and venture capitalists that buy distressed papers, sell off their real estate and impose draconian staff cuts.

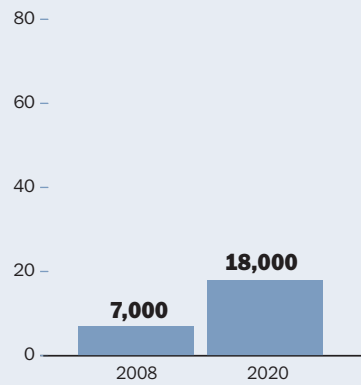
— Christopher Connell

2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005

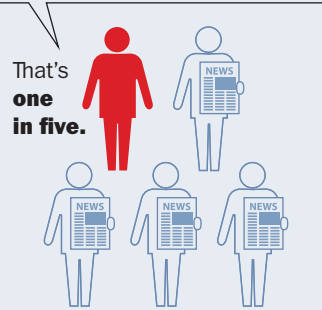
Newsroom employment has more than halved...



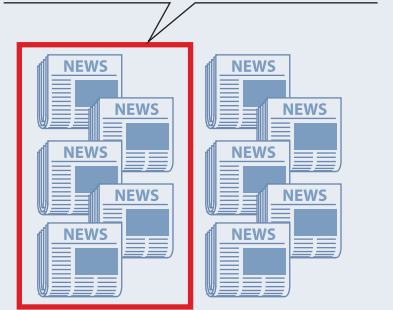
...only partially offset by an increase in **digital staff jobs**.



70 million Americans live in the **200+ counties with no newspaper** or just a weekly stretched to cover multiple communities.

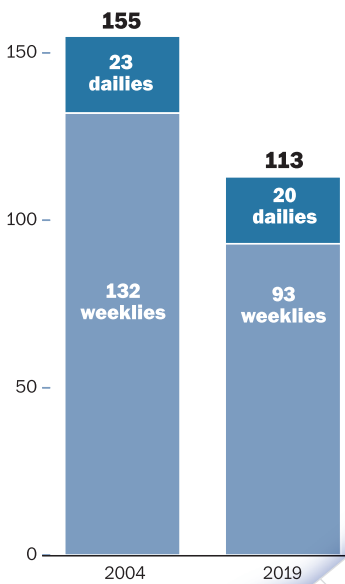


Five of the 10 largest U.S. newspaper companies are now **owned by hedge funds or other investors with unrelated businesses**.

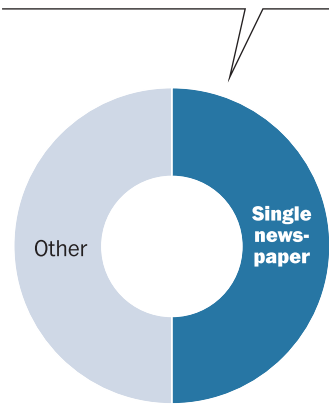


Nearly four dozen Virginia newspapers have closed or merged

More than 40 newspapers have closed or merged between 2005 and September 2022, according to the State of Local News. **Five more** have ceased publication in the first three months of 2023, according to the Library of Virginia.

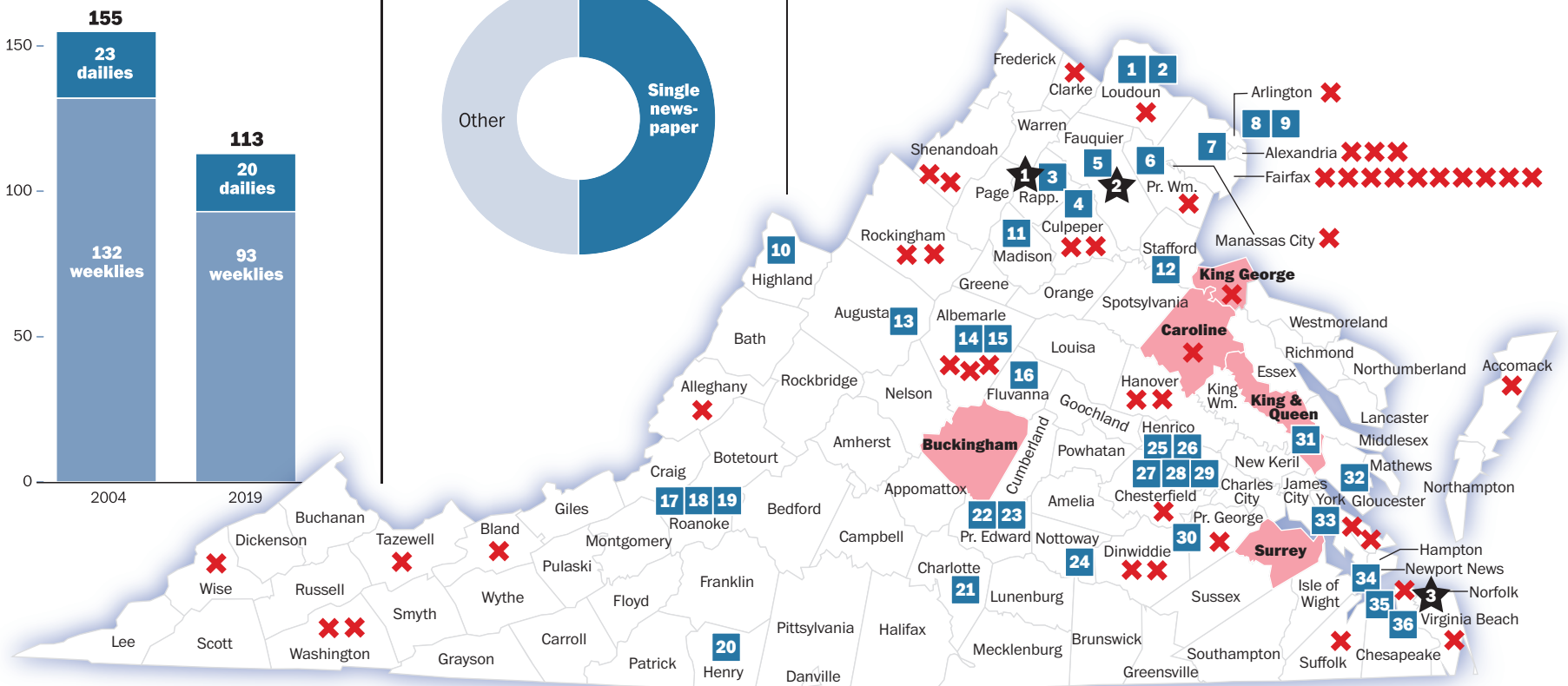


Half of Virginia's **134 counties** are now covered by a **single newspaper**.



Rural areas have been hit hard by the closings and mergers:

- State of Local News has declared five Virginia counties "news deserts"
- Paper closed, merged or deemed insufficient on news by State of Local News



XX Operating papers, websites mentioned in this series:

- | | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Loudoun Now | 10. The Recorder | 19. Roanoke Times | 28. Axios Richmond |
| 2. Leesburg Times-Mirror | 11. Madison County Eagle | 20. Martinsville Bulletin | 29. Richmond Free Press |
| 3. Rappahannock News | 12. Free Lance-Star | 21. Charlotte Gazette | 30. Progress-Index |
| 4. Culpeper Star-Exponent | 13. News-Virginian | 22. Farmville Herald | 31. Country Courier |
| 5. Fauquier Times | 14. Charlottesville Tomorrow | 23. Kenbridge-Victoria Dispatch | 32. Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal |
| 6. Prince William Times | 15. Daily Progress | 24. Courier-Record | 33. Williamsburg Yorktown Daily |
| 7. Korea Times | 16. Fluvanna Review | 25. Henrico Citizen | 34. Daily Press |
| 8. El Tiempo Latino, DC | 17. Cardinal News (online only) | 26. Richmond Times-Dispatch | 35. Virginian-Pilot |
| 9. Washington Blade, DC | 18. Roanoke Tribune | 27. Virginia Mercury (online only) | 36. WHRO Public Media |

Nonprofits providing content to various papers and sites

- ★ Foothills Forum in Washington, Va.
- ★ Piedmont Journalism Foundation in Warrenton
- ★ Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism in Norfolk

Sources: Pew Research Center, State of Local News Initiative, The Associated Press, Library of Virginia Newspaper Program

By Laura Stanton for Foothills Forum



Let's work together to preserve Virginia's local news

BY LARRY "BUD" MEYER

Local news – arguably as important to democracy as utilities are to everyday life – is imperiled. The erosion of the advertising-based business model for local newspapers – still the primary source for local news – means there are far fewer journalists covering the issues of concern to Virginians.

University of Virginia professor Jennifer Lawless, co-author of *News Hole*, is blunt: "The two decades since the turn of the century could hardly have been worse for local journalists."

Rappahannock citizens ought to consider themselves fortunate. They and others have generously supported eight years of award-winning explanatory journalism from the news nonprofit Foothills Forum. That in-depth coverage is skillfully presented by the for-profit (and well-liked) *Rappahannock News*.

Together we were first to bring Report for America to Virginia, giving young professionals like Julia Shanahan a start in their careers and doubling the weekly newsroom's reporting capacity. Reporting produced by Foothills folks has had an impact on topics ranging from broadband to taxes to kestrel boxes. In 2022, the Virginia Press Association recognized the *Rapp News* as the state's best newspaper in its category.

Too many residents and readers in the Old Dominion don't fare as well when it comes to local news.

The sad fact is, local newspapers – again, still the No. 1 source of local news – are disappearing. Some 2,500 U.S. newspapers have closed since 2005. One-third of U.S. newspapers will have been shuttered by 2025, and two more disappear each week. Between 2008 and 2020, the number of newspaper journalists plunged by 57%, from roughly 71,000 to about 31,000, according to the Pew Research Center.

Lawless says this decimation of local news plays a key role in the decline of civic engagement. Northwestern Professor Penelope Muse Abernathy, whose studies on news deserts detail the shrinking news universe, says the trend worsens the unsettling divide we're experiencing as Americans, a divide explored recently in a Foothills/*Rapp News* series titled "This Place." Thousands fewer journalists on duty means less awareness of what's happening in our counties, cities, classrooms and courts.

In Virginia, we've lost about 45 weekly papers and two dailies since 2005 – a 27% decrease. The pandemic made it worse.

Concern about the future of local news led Virginia Humanities (our statewide humanities council) and the Karsh Institute of Democracy at the University of Virginia to join

with local journalists to do something before it's too late.

They – we, as I'm involved in the effort – see the demise of local news as a triple threat. It threatens the already weakened corps of journalists in the field, loosens the guardrails of our democracy, and diminishes our ability to appreciate the history, cultures and traditions of Virginians.

What has resulted is a concerted effort to cooperate and collaborate. The lead organizations have assembled a two-day Virginia Local News Summit in Richmond later this month. Evan Smith, co-founder of the successful statewide nonprofit *Texas Tribune* and widely known as "the Johnny Appleseed of local news," is the keynote speaker. The mission: Support existing news outlets and develop new and financially sustainable models for delivering the news.

Foothills Forum, departing from its Rappahannock-only focus, has organized a public service journalism project, turning the reporting team's attention on the state's news industry itself. As you'll see in part one, while it's not a pretty picture, there are glimmers of hope – innovators and entrepreneurs starting up new, largely digital news-gathering efforts to keep their towns, regions and citizens informed. At the same time, existing news

outlets are embracing fresh approaches to survive.

In full disclosure, I love newspapers, having started by throwing rubber-banded issues of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on porches in my hometown of Hannibal, Mo., at age 8. I've engaged in some form of journalism ever since, with four newspapers on my resume, now helping to develop nonprofit news outlets. I have joined this statewide effort by chairing a diverse advisory committee. The message to them and others: In a field long dominated by hard-knuckled competition – get the scoop, break the news first – it's time for collaborative action.

Sadly, we recall the day last year that Rappahannock retailers were told they'd no longer receive print weekend editions of the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. But we adapt. Like you, I'm getting much of my news these days from newspapers' digital sites (and others) on my iPhone and iPad and Mac. I pay heed to Facebook, watch TV news and listen to local radio.

To paraphrase the *Post*'s Pulitzer Prize winner Dana Priest (a member of the advisory committee), we all know what the problem has been. Now it's time to come up with the solutions.

Larry "Bud" Meyer is co-founder and a board member of Foothills Forum. He chairs the Virginia Local News Summit advisory committee.

Thanks to you, your local news institution is strong

BY DENNIS BRACK

There is a danger in painting with broad brushes, even when that's not the intention. So let me be clear: Most newspapers aren't dying, and the Rappahannock News certainly isn't going anywhere.

This week, we feature a summary version of our partner Foothills Forum's look at local news in our state. You can find a more in-depth report at rappnews.com/localnews. The intent in presenting this project is simple: Quality sources of local news are more critical than ever. By focusing on this issue, hopefully we can continue to find innovative ways to support trusted community news institutions.

Personally, I prefer to concentrate more on solutions and the future than maps plotting closed newspapers (nothing against our mapper friends). Some newspapers sadly shut their doors, just as some other local businesses sadly shut their doors. The world changes.

Yes, there are and have been challenges facing newspapers – and practically every other legacy media business. That's why forward thinking organizations have adapted. We certainly have, thanks in part to innovative home-grown solutions.

The Rappahannock News used to publish the local news just once a week. We still do in print, of course. (And by the way, our flagship print paper is successful because both readers and advertisers find great value in it.) But we also publish whenever the news happens and deliver it to where you

are – your computer, your email inbox, your social media, your text messages.

Like so much in life, strong local news should be a virtuous circle – serve the community and they will support you. In Rappahannock County, we can say – with profound thanks – that has been the case, beginning with a supportive ownership group who cares about the paper's public service mission.

And for the past 8 years, we have had a uniquely successful partnership with local nonprofit Foothills Forum that has greatly enriched coverage of

our community. It's a model that inspired a similar arrangement in neighboring Fauquier and, hopefully, will prove adaptable in other places.

So, yes, it's definitely not a walk in the park, far from it. Most businesses these days aren't. But this is the little newspaper that can. When you include the Rapp News' digital audience, the "paper" is reaching more readers than ever.

Many other local publishers, big and small, and their staff are working day and night to serve their communities across the state. Let's use this conversation about local news to appreciate its necessity – and figure out how to support these dedicated folks. I sure appreciate everyone in Rappahannock who has supported our team. Thank you.

Dennis Brack is publisher of the Rappahannock News. His first brush with local news was as founder/editor/reporter/deliverer of a neighborhood newspaper he started in elementary school.

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NEWS

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► WHRO Public Media in Norfolk established a four-person newsroom in 2020 and recently acquired the Virginia Center for Investigative Journalism.

► Piedmont Journalism Foundation, backed by local donors, now owns the *Fauquier Times* and *Prince William Times*, both sharing new offices in Warrenton and expanding their enterprise and investigative reporting.

► *Charlottesville Tomorrow*, a self-described "socially conscious news organization," prides itself on community input into what it chooses to cover.

The growth of nonprofit news organizations nationwide has been the bright spot in the media landscape.

"Nonprofits are reinventing journalism in a lot of ways," said Sue Cross, executive director of the Insti-

tute for Nonprofit News in Los Angeles. "They aren't trying to substitute for a general-purpose newspaper that covered everything – sports, business, the chicken dinners and deeper civic coverage." Instead they concentrate on topics of "deepest interest of the community and then broaden out from that."

The Institute's 400 members employ 3,000 journalists, more than AP or the whole NPR network, she said.

Is this an adequate substitute for the thriving newspapers that used to be read by tens of millions of Americans?

"That is to be determined," Cross said. In an era when many watch YouTube and TikTok for their news, "the challenge for us is how do we make it engaging?"

Christopher Connell, former assistant bureau chief for The Associated Press in Washington, writes about public policy issues for foundations and nonprofit associations.

Nonprofit news organizations step in to boost local newspapers

BY CHRISTOPHER CONNELL
For Foothills Forum

There's a ray of light shining in the otherwise bleak landscape of local news: a profusion of new, colorful websites where readers can find out what's happening now instead of waiting until morning or midweek. These include the homepages of legacy newspapers themselves, but also nonprofit startups such as the Virginia Mercury and Cardinal News, as well as an older news organization, Charlottesville Tomorrow, which has reoriented itself to ensure coverage of diverse communities in Albemarle County.

Unlike many newspaper websites, these nonprofits don't put up paywalls but instead raise funds the way public radio and television stations do – from individuals, foundations and philanthropies, and, in Cardinal's case, from supportive businesses. In addition, two of the Commonwealth's largest public broadcasters have ramped up their relatively young news-gathering operations in Central Virginia and the Hampton Roads areas.

For a closer look at these innovators, new and old, see a full report at rapnews.com/newsinnovators.

Meanwhile, closer to home, two modest-sized nonprofits, Foothills Forum and the Piedmont Journalism Foundation, have stepped up to ensure that vital, often complex issues don't go unexplored in Rappahannock, Fauquier and Prince William counties.

Organizations' mission: helping local papers survive

The arrangements are unusual, but the situation is not: Two weeklies in rural counties near the Blue Ridge struggled to get by with staffs too small to cover all the issues important to residents' lives. Then they got help from two tax-exempt community organizations created to save local journalism.

While community foundations across Virginia may contribute to sustaining local reporting, that is the singular purpose of Foothills Forum in Rappahannock County and the Piedmont Journalism Foundation in Fauquier County.

Both have marshaled support not only from longtime residents with a civic bent, but also more recent arrivals whose careers took them to the heights of journalism, the foundation world, public affairs and business in Washington and elsewhere.

Not every community with a newspaper in trouble can count on such a pool of talent and financial support in its backyard, but those behind Foothills and Piedmont believe others can learn from their success.

The first to enter the scene was Foothills Forum, which grew out of a "Fourth Estate Friday," a once-a-month coffee and discussion convened by the Rappahannock News, almost a decade



BY DENNIS BRACK

Foothills Forum has helped the Rappahannock News provide more community reporting. Above, as the pandemic unfolded in April 2020, Luke Christopher and Sara Schonhardt interview Off the Grid's Anita Carshult for Foothills-assisted coverage of how Covid impacted local businesses.

ago. The participants included Bill Di- etel, former president of the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and Larry "Bud" Meyer, former Miami Herald journalist and executive of the Knight Foundation. Meyer took the reins as Foothills' chair for nine years.

The first thing Foothills did was canvas fellow residents on what issues concerned them most. It enlisted the University of Virginia's respected Center for Survey Research to poll all 3,200 households and remarkably got a 42 percent response rate.

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What that showed was that the issues of most concern were poor Internet and cell service – still a vexing problem – and maintaining the beauty of a largely unspoiled place, one of Virginia's smallest counties. Limiting taxes, a burning issue elsewhere, was seventh down the list.

Foothills began commissioning seasoned freelance reporters to write in-depth articles about these and other issues. "The Foothills Forum was hard to

sell and hard to explain at first," Meyer later recalled.

"It's been important for us to constantly stress that we're nonpartisan," said Andy Alexander, a former Washington bureau chief for Cox Newspapers and ombudsman of the Washington Post who recently succeeded Meyer as chair. Foothills had to overcome suspicions that it was a stalking horse for outsiders who wanted to speed development of the county.

It is a completely separate legal entity from the newspaper's parent company Rappahannock Media, owned since 2012 by president Dennis Brack and other partners. Brack, a former Washington Post editor, makes his own decisions about what to run. But with one editor-reporter and a young journalist from Report for America, a nonprofit that seeks to plug newsroom gaps, he welcomes all the help he can get. Foothills even pays 40 percent of that young reporter's salary and her rent.

That's not all. Foothills' 2021 tax return showed it raised \$219,000 in contributions from individuals and foundations and spent \$159,000. It puts on events to raise funds and educate the public about local journalism. It has a paid, part-time executive director, keeps two of the freelance reporters on retainer and pays for a freelance photographer and graphic designer, as well as a part-time web manager.

"We have a wonderful partnership with the Rappahannock News, but we are independent from them," Alexander said.

Foothills inspired a similar group of concerned citizens in Fauquier, the county next door, to found the Pied-



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Coming Up

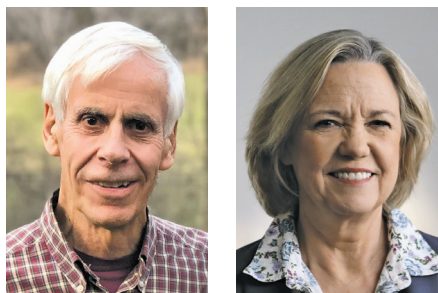
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mont Journalism Foundation in 2018 to furnish supplemental in-depth news coverage to the Fauquier Times and its sister weekly, the Prince William Times. Those papers, too, are operated for profit, except there wasn't any.

The Fauquier Times, first published in 1905, and its sister publication were sold in 2016 to 47 local investors determined to strengthen and improve the paper. In late 2019, the investment group, called Piedmont Media, transferred ownership of both papers to Piedmont Journalism Foundation, with a nominal payment of \$1,000 changing hands.



Boisfeuillet "Bo" Jones Jr. and Dana Priest of Fauquier's Piedmont Journalism Foundation.

Boisfeuillet "Bo" Jones Jr., former publisher of the Washington Post and chief executive officer of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions, became president of Piedmont Journalism Foundation, with Jessica Tuchman Mathews, longtime head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Georgia Herbert, former Fauquier County supervisor, as officers. (Mathews now chairs the board.) Dana Priest, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for the Post and a Knight professor of journalism at the University of Maryland, also sits on the board and helps guide its journalism.

Jones, a lawyer and former president of the Harvard Crimson, said a journal-

ism nonprofit that owns a newspaper needs "a community that is capable of funding it." Small donors "are great to have, but large donors are the ones who carry the weight."

It's also vital that the newspaper be run soundly as a business "and not just think that the Lord is going to provide and expect your philanthropic backers to keep putting money into it an uncontrolled losing operation. If it looks like a black hole, they'll stop donating to you."

Jones said Piedmont Journalism Foundation now expends about \$90,000 a year hiring freelancers and provides other support for its papers, when needed.

Both Alexander and Priest believe other places with struggling papers could benefit from establishing nonprofits like theirs.

"You need people in the community who understand the importance of preserving local journalism and have an appreciation of how journalists work and how a local newspaper comes together," said Alexander. "Most people don't understand that. They have a difficult time differentiating local, independent, non-partisan news from what they hear on TV or on the many ideological websites that call themselves news but aren't."

If public trust in the fairness and accuracy of journalism is to be restored, Priest believes that it will be won not by big, national news organizations but by capable local journalists. She began her own career in the 1980s covering county government for the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times at a time "when journalism was more trusted and you felt like you were writing for a community that listened. That doesn't happen in Washington anymore, but it happens here."

Christopher Connell is a freelance journalist and former assistant bureau chief for The Associated Press in Washington. He has undertaken assignments for both Foothills Forum and the Piedmont Journalism Foundation. Foothills Forum retained him to report this series on local news.

Leaders on the front lines



Profiles of an editor, publisher and a Middle Peninsula weekly paper bringing Virginians the news: Sarah Vogelsong, of the statewide Virginia Mercury (above with senior reporter Graham Moomaw); Tom Lappas, Henrico County; Brian Carlton, Farmville; and the Gloucester-Mathews Gazette-Journal.

► Read their stories at rapnews.com/leaders2

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