



2024 Issue Paper: Local News & Democracy

Position Statement

There is no LWWUS position on Local News and Democracy, although many LWWUS positions clearly note that the public's ability to fully participate in our democracy depends on a healthy and reliable system for disseminating information. Most obviously, that role is fulfilled by robust, independent and responsible local news.

A position adopted by the LWWUS convention in 1984 does state, "The League of Women Voters believes that democratic government depends upon the informed and active participation of its citizens and requires that governmental bodies protect the citizen's right to know by giving adequate notice of proposed actions, holding open meetings and making public records accessible."

And while there is no specific position, the LWWUS "Impact on Issues," refers to "news" and "media" 22 times.

In Washington state, with the member adoption of the Local News position by consensus in 2023, LWWVA believes, "it is the responsibility of the government to provide support for conditions under which credible local journalism can survive and thrive." Local news is defined as accurate, in-depth coverage of government entities, including but not limited to, city councils, county councils, county boards of commissioners, health departments, schools and school boards.

This position also supports credible and ethical local journalism as essential to our democracy. Access to information that enables people to cast informed ballots, meaning credible news sources, is integral to this pursuit. Barriers to that access, which include, but are not limited to, geography, economic status and education, should be removed. Additionally, the position notes that journalism may be presented in a variety of formats—print, online or as a hybrid of the two.

The position emphasizes that support for the viability of local news also may take a variety of forms, but control of the content must, at all times, remain exclusively with the news organization.

LWWVA also believes news media literacy and news education, including support for journalism students, are essential and that opportunities for these should be expanded in schools and throughout communities.

Legislative Background

The Local News crisis has closed 20 percent of Washington newspapers, reduced coverage dramatically throughout the state and resulted in the loss of more than 60 percent of newspaper newsroom jobs since 2008. With broad bipartisan support, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 5199 in 2023, allowing qualifying publishers to seek an exemption from the state Business & Occupations tax. Publishers and others welcomed the provision, although its impact is likely to offer minimal relief. Best estimates are the savings equal the cost of three full-time reporting jobs at The Seattle Times, and perhaps one full-time position at The Columbian in southwest Washington.

Prior to passage of SB 5199, newspaper publishers were eligible to apply for a reduced B&O tax rate, but that preference was set to expire. Introduced at the request of the state Attorney General, SB 5199 eliminates the B&O tax payment entirely from Jan. 1, 2024 until 2034.

Additional legislative progress in 2023 was \$2.4 million in state funding for an early career fellowship program managed by the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University. The funding will cover the cost of placing eight journalists in newsrooms in underserved communities throughout the state beginning in about mid-2024 and another eight the following year.

Upcoming 2024 Legislative Session

Two bills that League supports passed the Senate in 2023 but not the House, and they are expected to continue to be heard in 2024. These are SB 5102, which would expand the number of librarian/ teachers to teach digital citizenship in K-12; and SB 5626, which would, subject to the availability of funding, expand media literacy and digital citizenship instruction. It would do so by way of incorporating appropriate curriculum into statewide learning standards.

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