

# Why We Need Local Newspapers to Protect the Common Good

While many newspapers have shut down or laid off employees in the last ten years, many small-town newspapers across the country are not only surviving, but in some cases are thriving. That they are doing so is the result of several factors – their focus on local news, their feature stories on festivals, the arts, and local personalities, and the devotion of their editors and employees to their work.

Meet Scott McLeod.

McLeod is the founder, owner, and editor of the *Smoky Mountain News* (SMN) in Waynesville, North Carolina. The paper, a weekly, offers hard news on everything from school board meetings to environmental issues, features an “Outdoors” department, and contains a lively “Arts” section showcasing local musicians, actors, and artisans, and reviews of music, plays, and books. (A note: I have written book reviews for the paper for 20 years.)

The paper is a free weekly publication, with revenues raised from advertising. Distribution is 16,500 print copies per week in four counties and the Cherokee Reservation.

This summer the SMN celebrated its 20th anniversary.

Though he had a “fantastic journalism teacher” in high school, McLeod chose to major in English rather than journalism at Appalachian State University. After graduation, he worked as a carpenter for six years.

On a trip to Europe with his wife Lori, he began writing articles about his travels and found a market for them. Soon after his return, he went to work at the *Zebulon Record*, followed by writing for five other papers before he decided to

found the Smoky Mountain News.

“I wanted to stay in Western North Carolina and create a paper that was successful,” he said. “I thought I could do that.”

McLeod believes such papers provide several general goods, among which are bringing communities together, keeping people informed, and acting as a watchdog over local government and businesses.

We find such stories in the January 15, 2020 edition of the *SMN*. For instance, we can read about a missing teenage runaway, a champion snowboarder, and a battle over putting flowers and decorative memorabilia on graves in the Green Hill public cemetery, where my wife lies buried, and where someday I will lie beside her.

“In communities that have lost their local papers, studies have shown the cost of government goes up,” McLeod says.

McLeod acknowledges there are difficulties in being a small-town reporter. He tells his new reporters, “Your goal is not to be liked by your sources. Your goal is to be respected.”

“It’s when you write something about someone you know and put them in a bad light. DWI, or some statement they wish they could take back,” McLeod added. “We have to cover it and be honest about it. You’re going to write that story, and the next time you see that person will be the most uncomfortable moment. You have to say something. What are you going to say?”

He pauses, then adds, “And it’s not usually a bad person, just someone who made a mistake.”

One example was a tale about the CEO of the local hospital. After the *SMN* ran a story about doctors critical of the hospital’s policies, that CEO cut all of the hospital’s advertisements with the paper and demanded that *SMN* distribution boxes be removed from hospital grounds.

Eventually he left, and the paper was allowed back into the hospital.

McLeod is proud of the way the paper has helped improve the local area, pushing for a second recreational center, addressing various road issues, and backing the Save the Mountains program.

At the end of our conversation, McLeod mentioned that the “business was changing really fast” and that in the case of the *SMN*, “advertising revenues were down.”

Whether the country can survive without *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* I will leave for others to debate. But communities are the losers when local newspapers go down the tubes.

Penny Abernathy’s research for of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill has identified ever expanding parts of America that are now “[News Deserts](#)” because of the death of local papers. At the Brookings Institution, Clara Henrickson in “[Local journalism in crisis](#)” backs up McLeod’s advocacy for local news outlets and offers some suggestions for how these papers might make a comeback, including recommendations such as making newspaper subscriptions tax-deductible.

To keep our communities strong and informed, we need papers like the Smoky Mountain News. They’ll only stay in business if we support them through subscriptions and advertising.

Let’s make that investment.

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