

# Good communities need informed citizens

**W**e all have habits that help us with stress reduction. Some folks watch television. Some play video games. I'll confess my habit is reading entries on Next Door, an app on my phone that allows neighbors within a community to talk to each other about incidents of concern, pet peeves, things for sale and whatever someone is brave enough to post about.

The subjects are broad. Political discussions are the worst – everyone's worst side comes out. I don't do Facebook but imagine what I see on Next Door is akin to some discussions that take place on Facebook about politics. No winners come out from those battles.

But what bothers me most are the complaints on the app about the cost to renew subscriptions of the *Kansas City Star*. I happen to have paid my six-month renewal a few days ago. It wasn't cheap. But it is a product delivered to my door every day, rain or shine, snow or ice, that I depend on to keep me informed. The cost is about \$112/month – considerably less than I pay monthly for my cable bill and less than I pay for tickets to concerts or other entertainment.

Doesn't matter. The folks in my neighborhood seem to think it's ridiculous. I realize the paper is thinner than it used to be. The number of reporters down at the offices in the *Star* printing plant have diminished greatly – a group of well-seasoned ones took buyouts just in the last few

days and will be moving on. That will impact the scope of its coverage. Still, I would miss my paper if it weren't there every morning. For me, reading it online would be cheaper, but I like having that paper with my morning coffee (Love those MPA coffee mugs that talk about the "smell of newspaper in the morning!")

Neighbors who complain about the cost of the subscription also have lots of complaints about city government. Some are legitimate; some are not. But who do they think will be playing watchdog of city government if the newspaper doesn't have reporters down at city hall? Who will cover state government for them if the newspaper went away? These neighbors don't appear to regularly attend city council meetings themselves.

A few suggest that folks subscribe to national publications, like the *Wall Street Journal*, which are fine newspapers but seldom, if ever, darken the doors of Kansas City's city hall. Television stations and radio stations will suffice, some suggest. I am not accusing broadcast entities of doing what used to be called "rip and read" from the paper, but I suspect they determine where to send reporters at times on the basis of what's in that day's newspaper – mainly because their staffs are generally even smaller than the local paper, and they don't have "beat" reporters who check in on a regular basis to see what might be happening down at city hall. They

work hard but have only about 15 minutes daily to update you on what's happening in town. In-depth stories in those media are rare.

Last summer, the *Columbia Journalism Review* did an article about who suffers when local media disappears. Kyle Pope, the editor in chief who wrote the article, noted that not having a local paper can impact a town's residents in making life decisions.

"What does it mean not to have local news in your town? Would it change where you live, how you raise your kids, where they go to school? It would if a local coach were abusing kids and would have kept doing so if a newspaper hadn't reported it. It would if money that was supposed to be going to city services was instead going to higher financing costs for government bonds, since no one was paying attention to the deals the city was cutting. It would if there were a spike in health viruses, because there wasn't the news infrastructure to warn people to be safe."

We need to be sure we are getting the message out to our readers that their local newspaper is very important to them as citizens in their community. I confess this column isn't really about legal issues. But I've spent a lot of time in the last 30 days dealing with language in bills down in Jefferson City that threatens to significantly harm local newspapers.

While I fight the battles in terms of legal concerns, I also hope that readers of local papers out there are doing their part to support the role of their hometown paper in their community. Good government depends on input from informed and knowledgeable readers. Who depend on their daily or weekly paper to keep them that way.

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