

Making a difference at the state capitol

Newspapers should cover, communicate with legislators

With the start of the new year comes the opening of the Missouri legislative session. Bills are being filed and committee hearings have begun. The next few months are busy as Doug Crews, Missouri Press Association's executive director, with the help of our lobbyists, watch for bills that might have an impact on newspapers across the state.

You play a role in that activity. You know that MPA sends out a weekly summary of legislative activity and I encourage you to read that carefully. Watch for news about bills that will have an impact on businesses in your town and write about those issues. Your readers can help you localize those activities.

And, of course, watch for your legislator to be in town. While most are busy in Jefferson City this time of year, they do stop by to visit on occasion. For certain, they send you columns they want you to publish for them. Those columns are full of thoughts about how they are watching out for local interests.

I encourage you to push your legislators for details about statements that seem to have local importance. Call their office and ask them to flesh out things they say with local examples. Ask for bill numbers, if they mention legislation, so you can give your readers specific information to make it easy for them to follow progress of legislation.

Be the reporters I know you can be – do not just accept what you are handed as the “full story” about what is happening up there in our state's capitol!

Come to Jefferson City in a few weeks for the Missouri Press Association and Associated Press' Day at the Capitol. While you are there, stop in to see your local legislators. Call to tell them you are coming and want a chance for a few minutes for an interview. Plan ahead a few pertinent questions you can ask. Take



Jean Maneke,
is MPA's Legal Hotline attorney.
Contact her at (816) 753-9000;
jmaneke@manekelaw.com.

advantage of being on their “turf” to write a story about what they are doing. Politicians love publicity.

Your readers need to understand how what their legislators do affects their lives. Bring the point home to them. Most of them don't get to make a trip to Jefferson City. MPA makes this easy for you and you shouldn't let this opportunity pass you by.

As you follow what your local legislators are doing, take the opportunity to praise them for taking a stand that benefits your local readers. They will appreciate the recognition. Of course, if they are taking an action that is creating controversy in town, you should cover that, also.

That presents a great opportunity for a detailed look at why the legislator is taking the position that he or she is taking and why local interests are concerned about it. Help your readers see both sides of the issue.

For example, just last month a new state representative wrote “home” in his column that he was grateful for the chance to serve: “As we move into a new year, we find ourselves confronted with many issues and challenges. Yet, many new opportunities abound when we realize truly great ideas come from our citizens in the district and not from government.”

Sentences like that just beg for specifics. What issues are this legislator most concerned about? What challenges does he intend to focus on? What ideas have district residents presented to him that he wants to focus on and share with his fellow legislators? What is this

legislator's number-one priority for this session?

When you read these “letters home,” use them as a springboard for a 15-minute phone call and ask your legislator some simple questions like this. Add your quotes to this and turn this into a story. You get some personal insight from someone your readers need to know. You turn a puff-piece into some hard news.

Last, but most importantly, when you get word from MPA that an urgent phone call or editorial support is needed to deal with a crisis, make those calls to your legislators! Write those editorials! Take a stand and show that Missouri newspapers care about what happens in Jefferson City!

MPA constantly reminds us that newspapers write the “first draft of history.” If you don't write it, it won't be recorded. Write those stories. Tell what's happening locally and how it is affected by what government does, on the local, state and national level. Legislators are indeed watching what you say and especially note when you call them. You can make a difference in what happens in our state capital!

“I encourage you to push your legislators for details about statements that seem to have local importance... turn a puff piece into hard news.”