



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

Local Journalism Task Force Meeting Minutes December 11, 2023

Event/Meeting: Local Journalism Task Force Meeting

Date/Time: December 11, 2023, at 1:30 p.m.

Location: Teleconference via Webex

Members Present: Jordan Abudayyeh, Jesús Del Toro, Jenna Dooley, Randy Eccles, Sam Fisher, Prof. Tim Franklin, Prof. Dong “HD” Han, Tim Myers, Jason Piscia, Sen. Steve Stadelman, Allison Petty, Mark Jacob, Christopher Willadsen

Appointed Members Absent: Josh McGhee, Adam Rhodes, Mayor Julie Moore Wolfe, Sen. Donald DeWitte, Rep. Dave Vella

Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) Staff Present: Emily Bolton, Eliza Glezer, Brittany Davis

Call to Order: Meeting began at approximately 1:35 p.m. with brief overview.

Roll Call: 13 members were present; quorum was met.

Adoption of the Minutes: Minutes from the December 1, 2023, Local Journalism Task Force Meeting were unanimously adopted via voice vote.

Brief Introduction: Chairman Stadelman gave a brief welcome and introduction of agenda to continue discussion of report and plan to outline legislative proposals.

Discussion: The main themes discussed are below:

Mark Jacob: Team has started writing different sections of report, will hand off to each other for editing. May be finished by end of week. Introduction explains problem, how we got here, why it’s important, and policy options. Hannah and Mary working on policy options. Issue is whether we’re doing recommendations and if we’re doing recommendations, how we go about making that the sense of the task force rather than the sense of the writing team. If doing recommendations, have to figure out process for how to decide what we recommend. Suggest two buckets – one of suggestions for now and another to consider later, that way we include all options. Could list policy options at bottom of report and list what should be done. Could do report and put things in both buckets then whole task force could decide what should be moved or distribute all options and task force decides what to

recommend in report. Doesn't have to be a perfect sync in report vs. what's offered in Senator Stadelman's legislation.

Chairman Stadelman: Not at stage of what's on or off list regarding legislation yet, want to get more input. Have an idea of what's more impactful or problematic. Shouldn't inhibit what task force report is at this point. Focus on task force and maybe put in two buckets – immediate vs. later. Open to discussion.

Mark Jacob: Whether report gets into too much political gamesmanship as far as how possible it is... hesitant if we lose focus on what's best for keeping reporters at newspapers and other central issues. As we go through policy options, no problem saying one may be more difficult to get over the hill than others but don't want it to come across as political analysis.

Chairman Stadelman: Don't need to get into political analysis game. Not opposed to pros and cons, but don't need to dive into political viability. What's most impactful, direct, effective from policy perspective – more of an analysis.

Randy Eccles: Key with policies is what are the policy outcomes that work – how are we going to measure, what are intended results of those policies. Talked about hiring reporters, how many different places get served or underserved audiences – how does policy get there?

Mark Jacob: Asked for assistance with sentences on state of play with broadcast.

Jenna Dooley: Good exercise to do fact finding – want to mention before conclusion of task force. Getting caught up in defining a journalist. Less of desire to see role of task force define a journalist. Maybe outline in report who isn't a journalist – might be easier to prevent entities operating outside of state or in automated way rather than defining journalist. [Link](#) from broadcasting public media group – 36 states receive direct state appropriations. For what it's worth, Illinois spends 12 cents per capita on public media. Rising costs of public media – haven't been huge increases. \$1.6 million. Neighbor states spending much more. In order to be in good standing, Illinois requirement is station receiving it has to be in good standing with corporation for public broadcasting – annual process. Over 90% of state does have access to some public media – infrastructure is there. State funding to public media in Illinois – much lower than in neighboring states regardless of political landscaping.

Randy Eccles: Not necessarily journalism.

Jenna Dooley: Related to public affairs too.

Randy Eccles: Unrestricted grant to operation costs of TV and radio. Might support arts and education, getting shows on air. Could include journalism but doesn't specifically address that.

Chairman Stadelman: Radio and tv exclusive?

Jenna Dooley: Related to direct public appropriation for public broadcasting.

Chairman Stadelman: Definition of journalist describing what they're not vs. what they are... elaborate on that?

Jenna Dooley: Such a variety of landscape in Illinois, not only in commercial and startups and family-owned business, larger corporations. Would be difficult to wordsmith what a journalist is. Trying to prevent outside influence for purpose of political agenda. Focus on what we're trying to prevent – may be more direct than saying



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journalist must work X number of hours/week, employ this many people, etc. Public broadcasters have to have definition with specifics to get appropriations. Beyond direct appropriations, want to prevent people creating content for purposes of political agenda.

Chairman Stadelman: Focused on getting people at local school boards, city councils – need some type of requirement to make sure we’re targeting this sector/area. Maybe a combination of both – what is a journalist, but also make sure we’re not funding those with political agenda.

Tim Franklin: Going to publish a [story](#) tomorrow with Harvard Neiman Lab that looks at what other states are doing. Now 20 states have legislation pending or passed to help local news. We’d be among a larger group than we thought in terms of providing support. Agree with idea of keeping politics out of report. Would it help Senator Stadelman or the Governor to have the endorsement of the task force behind a legislative proposal? If so, should definitely do recommendations. But maybe pass if less so.

Chairman Stadelman: Certainly hope so. Envision attempt to get media coverage for recommendations or task force report to build increased awareness of what’s going on and what’s to come. Yes, support is good but will have to be decisions for political viability at the end of the day. Hope task force will be willing to endorse and support.

Jordan Abudayyeh: Task force report is menu of recommendations that everyone thinks are good policy proposals that have been studied. Then allow the lawmakers to pull from this menu of recommendations then let the politics take it from there.

Mark Jacob: List policies that have merit?

Jordan Abudayyeh: Putting those in task force report and saying we studied them and they have merit is basically a recommendation. We won’t be asked to draft a bill but want to draft something comprehensive with everything we’ve learned and discussed over the past year. Listing it in report is the recommendation in itself. We wouldn’t put a bad idea in the report.

Jesús Del Toro: Something important in addition to relevance of proposal is the timing. Local communities need support right now. Policy options that are short term may be worth highlighting impact. How different proposals fulfill need that will be helpful fast. Definition of journalism – hard to find definition but also task force related to proposing legislation will define journalist could be invasive. But some definitions already exist – broad and general. Some local outlets – political definition is important, such as endorsing candidates in election to empower community, help democratic and political participation. Political in a good sense. If that’s the kind of political we want, would be hard to differentiate from the others who may be bad actors. Complicated.

Hannah Carroll: In terms of complications defining journalist, have a report and spoke with experts who shared suggestions and explained why it’s complicated. May look at defining news outlets to feed out bad actors rather than journalists. Can send along that document.

Chairman Stadelman: Yes, will be reviewing that. We’ll be reaching out to groups that worked with other states to draft legislation and worked in this space. To Jordan’s suggestion, report does mention proposals we think are

good ideas that can have an impact. How do we organize those? List them with more analysis as far as the impact they have, timeliness, two bucket approach? If we mention in report, it's a stamp of approval.

Mark Jacob: Like Jordan's idea – gets us out of wrangling and ranking things and lets Senator Stadelman do what his job is – craft legislation based on those findings. List all ideas we think have merit.

Chairman Stadelman: More subjectivity in what our list may entail. Thumbs up from Allison. Mark, is that list complete already?

Mark Jacob: No, Mary and Hannah are working on it but have a good start. Going to meet tomorrow to do a logistical check on where we are. Not far from having good first draft of list available.

Chairman Stadelman: Survey incorporated most of what would be on that list. California Journalism Protection Act could be mentioned as well.

Mary Randolph: List in terms of analysis and descriptions not fully complete or edited. Descriptions of essentially all policies voted on in survey. Also, all policies out there now, including California Journalism Protection Act. Could be smart to organize list a bit further, otherwise it's a list of all policies out there now.

Chairman Stadelman: How many are we looking at?

Mary Randolph: 8

Mark Jacob: 3 tax credits, tax exemption, grants, fellowships, claw back from tech companies, etc.

Chairman Stadelman: Is there a way to group them together to make it easier to comprehend?

Mark Jacob: Short term vs. long term?

Mary Randolph: Yes, could be great. These are all the options we've had since the beginning. Want to leave with more than we started with.

Mark Bonne: Some could be grouped together by type. Three are various forms of tax credits, others are grant award type programs. Maybe show how they group together both ways, doesn't have to be either or.

Chairman Stadelman: Tim, are you publishing that report regarding other states?

Tim Franklin: [Report](#) posts tomorrow morning. Will send around to task force. Draft made available to Mark to help with drafting of report.

Mark Jacob: Yes, sent to writing committee.

Tim Franklin: Like bunching together tax credits, fellowships, grants. Lends coherence to what we're doing. Short term vs. long term – agnostic. Not sure if it helps to mention what other states have passed in our report.

Mary Randolph: Quick descriptions of what other states have done, with links, in report.



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Jason Piscia: People may have noticed this already, but Rebuild Local News put out this piece outlining what they'd like to see in the California bill. It covers many of our ideas here. So it may help provide some inspiration for how we discuss things in our report. <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/testimony-submitted-to-the-senate-judiciary-committee-on-local-journalism-in-the-digital-age/>

Chairman Stadelman: Have we discussed everything other states have passed?

Sam Fisher: Comprehensive.

Mary Randolph: Yes.

Chairman Stadelman: Tim (Franklin), 20 states have passed something?

Tim Franklin: Passed or considering something.

Chairman Stadelman: Time is of the essence so may be calling some meetings over the coming weeks. Maybe once or twice more to discuss specific recommendations and how they're described in the report. Will send out availability.

Sam Fisher: Hopefully will have a draft of report by Friday. Who will send to task force?

Emily Bolton: We can share.

Chairman Stadelman: Wait until come up with draft then find meeting time shortly after that once people have reviewed.

Sam Fisher: California Journalism Preservation Act had meeting last week, so seems like it's rolling ahead. Something to watch. A lot of the heavy lifting has been done by their folks. Tech was represented there, and they make the case that they have help. Google News Initiative and other endeavors. Will be interesting to see what happens and what tech does. Large numbers. Nice that California is going down the road and kicking the tires on this so if we do this, some of it has already been done.

Chairman Stadelman: Should be included in our report recommendations. Legislatively, want Illinois to be part of the discussion. Maybe introduce a different vehicle strictly for that particular component. Fascinating issue, potential biggest long-term impact.

Sam Fisher: There are organizations out there that will lend their support too, like News Media Alliance – represented at hearing last week.

Tim Franklin: Where does legislation stand?

Sam Fisher: Sent to Senate, passed Assembly. Public forum last week. Next place is judiciary in the Senate. Seems that they're really making sure they have all the details put in order. They have different way of doing it than

federal proposal (not having antitrust so news outlets can bargain collectively). In California, there would be an arbitrator. Problem in Australia is not many outlets got a lot of money. We need to make sure smallest outlets are beneficiaries of this type of legislation.

Tim Franklin: Senator (Stadelman), you mentioned who may help with drafting legislation. CEO of News Media Alliance, Danielle Coffey – has been on front lines of question about tech platforms reimbursing local news for content. Danielle could be a good resource.

Sam Fisher: She testified in California on two separate occasions.

Chairman Stadelman: Help with legislation or tech issue?

Tim Franklin: They'd be happy to help with legislation.

Public Comment: One member of the public offered comment.

- **Andy Grimm:** Member of public and reporter from Chicago Sun-Times, also worked at Tribune and small papers. President of Chicago News Guild. Spent year working on legislative attempts to aid struggling news industry. Worked with members and community groups. Excited to hear about report. When looking at public policy solutions, try to incentivize good actors – want more journalists because more journalists is more coverage, depth, nuanced coverage. Blessed in Chicago area relative to other spaces. We also have examples of ills – for example, Tribune purchased by hedge fund, also owner of largest newspapers in country, major shareholder in chains. Raise rates, prices, and cutting staff – Tribune membership half of what it was since ownership change. Revenue out there. Current crop of owners, hedge fund influenced media companies, are driving business. Not just about Alden but need to look at where we want this money to be invested. Need string attached to make sure investing money in the newsroom. Members of public rely on news reporting. Need a mechanism if giving tax credits that they're not cutting positions elsewhere or using it to subsidize staffing. Noteworthy organizations place reporters in underserved communities but no longer sending fellows to papers owned by Alden because used as free position – no net increase in newsroom staffing. Want to incentivize best possible behavior. Big tech might be more inclined to open their pockets if they knew this was actually going to a public benefit and not just another industry. The way we have maximum impact is making sure public dollars/revenue is landing in the newsroom – more reporters. Pay scale in newspapers is shockingly poor. Members in South Bend have average salary \$40,000/year. Over the years, many colleagues left field because they wanted to start a family, buy a house, not have two roommates, so go to a different field like PR. When look at these positions, salaries need to be something people can build a life on, otherwise young folks saddled with significant college debt. Plea to consider solutions and incentivize behavior we want. Current crop of media owners with scores of papers – is that what best serves the public? Sun-Times now nonprofit that was donated to public radio station. When you take profit model out, you get folks entirely focused on public service of journalism. Get back to roots of community-based, local ownership. Make it more appealing to sell off papers to local organizations. Local ownership cares about the community – those are the kind of owners we can get behind. Thank you for your work – this is a deeply uncovered issue.
- **Chairman Stadelman:** Great description of challenges facing local journalism. When dealing with chains, do we not want to incentivize them to put local reporters in newsroom? How we do that and how we describe legislation is important. Not opposed to helping them out, right?
- **Andy Grimm:** No. News industry hasn't had similar outreach as industrial jobs bringing factory to a community. If there's a way to take a census of employees with employee codes or something at state level – make sure the head count of their journalist employees – there needs to be a net increase so not just



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subsidizing profit margins of these big chains. Chains are profitable, but they're not putting profits back into the newsroom. These companies are focused on collecting cash flow, not being in business in 5-10 years. There could be tranches of organizations and what amount of money they're eligible for. Do something to gauge need in specific community. Pool money then go out based on need. Goal is to sustain small, regional local newspapers and good actors that are out there.

- **Tim Franklin:** Talked about providing policy incentives for local ownership news organizations. Lee Enterprises announced it was selling Southern Illinoisan to Paxton Media, then Paxton let go all journalists at Southern Illinoisan. There was an entity in Belleville ready to buy, but they sold to Paxton. Had the sale gone differently, local journalism could have been saved. Not sure if we're still considering local ownership incentives. Rebuild Local has talked about replanting strategy for local news organizations. This is an example of what can happen in that situation with a sale. Any more information on that situation?
- **Andy Grimm:** Don't have Guild members there. But this is the issue – these are business imperatives they're striking. Ghost newspaper phenomenon – just a headline. If you can create a scenario where it's a better business proposition for Lee to sell to that local group... federal incentive to do with capital gains. Do something to put folks on equal footing with someone that's a hedge fund or chain-owned paper – some way to put local ownership groups on equal footing. Small family-owned chains looking for an out that wasn't selling to a media news group. Matching funds – giant pool of revenue that could be capital for local groups.
- **Chairman Stadelman:** Have any of the 20 states incorporated incentives to local companies?
- **Tim Franklin:** Not sure.
- **Mary Randolph:** Haven't heard anything about states pursuing this. Can look into it more. Mentions only in Rebuild Local News replant proposal.
- **Chairman Stadelman:** Might be helpful to look into that over the next week or so.
- **Jason Piscia:** Put [link](#) in chat to some things Rebuild Local News wanted to see in capital bill. Four month waiting period after announcement of sale that gives local groups time to put a bid together. Could make a difference.
- **Sam Fisher:** Companies like Paxton have combined titles and happening quite a bit
- **Andy Grimm:** Sun-Times sale – were to be sold to Chicago Tribune, which almost certainly would have shut them down. 18-month strategy to eliminate competition. Justice Department Antitrust Division compelled previous owners to publish a front-page ad announcing Sun-Times was on sale and would go through to Tribune if nobody beat their bid. Local group was able to buy for \$1. State intervening on transactions like that could be impactful. Like a review for hospital construction.

Adjournment: Meeting was adjourned by Chairman Stadelman at approximately 2:44 p.m.