

# REBUILD LOCAL NEWS

February 14, 2022

Honorable Delegate Vanessa E. Atterbeary  
Honorable Delegate Jheanelle K. Wilkins  
Ways and Means Committee  
Maryland House of Delegates  
House Office Building, Room 131  
6 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

To Delegates Atterbeary and Wilkins,

I am the director of policy for the Rebuild Local News Coalition, which represents more than 20 journalism organizations committed to strengthening local news. The coalition's groups represent more than 3,000 newsrooms and include publishers, labor unions, rural and metropolitan news outlets, members of the Spanish-speaking and historic Black press, nonprofit newsrooms and publications small, medium, and large.

The Rebuild Local News Coalition strongly supports H.B. 0540. The bill, inspired by the national Local Journalism Sustainability Act, would preserve news outlets' editorial independence while offering a critical lifeline between small businesses and local news outlets.

Since 2000, there has been an 81% drop in newspaper advertising revenue. This disruption has resulted in the loss of journalism jobs and democratically vital news outlets across the country. Nationally, there has been an almost 60% decrease in the number of newspaper newsroom workers since 2004. More than 2,000 newspapers have closed since 2004. About 100 closed during the early years of the pandemic alone and the decline is likely to continue at a pace of two per week according to Penny Abernathy of Northwestern University, one of the leading experts on the decline of local news. In addition to closures, widespread consolidation by hedge funds and chains has characterized newspapers for the last decade.

Maryland has seen the effects of this contraction first hand. Alden Global Capital purchased Tribune Publishing and the *Baltimore Sun* along with it, despite a bid for the *Sun* from Maryland businessman Stewart Bainum. But, Maryland has also seen the innovation this crisis has inspired.

The Baltimore Banner launched in 2022. The Bowie Sun, a hyperlocal website serving the city of Bowie, launched in 2021. Legacy publications, like *AFRO News*, have

innovated their business model in their journalism, leveraging philanthropic funds to cover the Black business community in Baltimore and creating new products to reach young audiences.

This innovation is critical for Maryland communities. Communities without local news have less civic engagement, lower voter turnouts, more waste, more corruption and even higher pollution without watchdogs to monitor the industries in their own backyards. Towns with less local news even have lower bond ratings and higher taxes. Polarization and misinformation grows.

This policy would give legacy publications and new entrants a tool to both retain advertisers and attract new ones, building important relationships with the business community. In a case study Rebuild Local News produced about how the advertising tax credit in the federal Local Journalism Sustainability Act would have affected *AFRO News*, *AFRO* Executive Director Lenora Howze said “with this incentive, she could see herself developing new relationships, creating new lines of advertising revenue on top of the *AFRO*’s loyal advertisers.”

We thank Delegates Vogel, Foley, Fair, Grossman, D. Jones, Lehman, and Wells for introducing this bill. It appropriately incentivizes community investment in an essential public good. When workers at the *Capital Gazette* unionized along with their colleagues at the *Carroll County Times* and *Baltimore Sun*, they wrote:

Local journalism is unique. We are your neighbors, the eyes and ears of your communities. We report on what matters most to you every day: the crime down the block, the local football team, your child’s school. Whether the sun shines or disaster strikes, we are right there with you. As local news outlets dwindle, we know now more than ever that quality community news is a gift too precious to lose.

This bill is an important first step in securing the future of Maryland local news for years to come, supporting workers, news publishers and the communities they serve.

The Rebuild Local News Coalition urges you to pass House Bill 540.

Anna Brugmann  
Director of Policy  
Rebuild Local News