

Thank you Chairman Wilson, members of the committee, and Delegate Lehman for inviting me here today.

My name is Rafael Lorente and I am the dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Before joining the college almost 20 years ago, I spent 13 years as a reporter covering every level of government -- small towns and large cities, the Florida legislature, Congress, the White House and federal agencies.

Merrill College is one of the country's best journalism programs, and it sits in one of America's finest public universities. We train the next generation of journalists and researchers, as well as provide writing and critical thinking skills for students who enter law, public service, communications and more.

We are at the forefront of using data, data visualization and even AI to make journalism better. And we serve the state through our teaching and research, and through news organizations staffed by students and edited by award-winning faculty.

Many of you know us because our student reporters in Capital News Service have covered press conferences, legislative hearings and more here in Annapolis, in Washington and around the state for almost 35 years. We also run the Povich Center for Sports Journalism, the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism and the Local News Network, which has increased our local news coverage to fill gaps where Maryland's traditional news outlets need help.

Our students' work appears in news outlets in your communities and across the country. In the last six years, our students have won countless awards, at least a dozen of those in competitions against professional news outlets around the country.

Last year, the Local News Network published a first-of-its-kind news ecosystem study of Maryland. Our goal was to find out what kind of access Marylanders have to information about their communities. We weren't interested in the national coverage, but in local coverage about millage rates, garage sales and high school sports. We gathered information on traditional news outlets, but also on Facebook pages, neighborhood email listservs and other methods residents are using to stay informed.

I've included a link to the study at the end of my testimony. It's not a pretty picture. Several counties in the state, especially in Western and Eastern Maryland, have little coverage of town hall meetings, school boards and other institutions. Neither Prince George's nor Montgomery has a news outlet devoted to covering the county as a place, leaving county executives, county councils, courthouses and more without much coverage. Only Baltimore has something resembling healthy coverage and needed competition.

Maryland is not unique. Around the country, local news outlets are disappearing at alarming rates. Driven out by a changing business model that has starved them of revenue, they are leaving behind news deserts all over our nation.

The consequences are not good for those communities and for the people who serve them - police, firefighters, doctors, nurses and others. A less informed public suffers more during a natural disaster and is less likely to partner with institutions and public servants. The disappearance of local news leads to lower civic engagement, less volunteering and more polarization. Mis- and dis-information fill the void.

HB51 will not solve these problems. It will not provide a new business model, nor will it get millions of Americans to take their eyes off social media videos. Journalists, business leaders and others will have to find solutions. There are many out there trying, opening new outlets, experimenting with new revenue sources or operating as nonprofits. But they need time and a little help. Government has a role to play.

HB51 could provide some relief. You see, before many local outlets close, they are purchased by hedge funds or private equity firms that are not interested in providing maritime conditions around Annapolis, crop information in Millsboro, traffic patterns in Baltimore and D.C., or ski conditions in Deep Creek. They buy these outlets and slowly turn them into ghosts of their former selves, stripping them for parts and taking every penny of their value out of our communities.

Giving advance notice to communities and business leaders might allow time for local investors to buy a news outlet before it suffers that fate. Or it might allow a nonprofit to form. In either case, it would help slow the high level of consolidation in the industry.

In every community that a news outlet is saved and stays independent, you will have a better chance at informed, safer and more involved constituents. You may even have friendlier neighbors because while we often disagree about national tax policy and foreign affairs, most of us want paved roads, good schools and safe streets.

This is not a partisan issue. Local news and information is valuable to liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, and everyone else. It is critical in a democratic republic. Whatever the differences that divide Americans, we are better off with accurate information and watchdogs looking out for the few bad apples that exist in every field and make the rest of us, whether elected officials, journalists, police officers, lawyers or others, look bad. Our founders knew that and made freedom of the press a bedrock right. We are the lucky descendants of their wisdom. We must find ways to protect it. Thank you.

Local News Ecosystem Study:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g8LHk\\_sP2TuQ3wYKBATYJOeQF3KefwEh/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g8LHk_sP2TuQ3wYKBATYJOeQF3KefwEh/view)