

Jan. 12, 2020

Good morning, Chairman Lefor and Members of the Committee. I'm Jill Denning Gackle, publisher of BHG newspapers, which are as far north as Garrison, as west as Beulah and as east as McClusky.

Please allow me to begin by telling you a little bit about a year as a weekly newspaper publisher during a world pandemic.

With 55 employees producing 9 newspapers for dozens of communities, we took the role of essential services very seriously. We mandated masks before they were unpopular, we turned our retail space into curbside pickup, we extended overdue subscriptions so people would keep informed until they could pay the bill. All while we watched event after event in our tourism/ community driven region cancel.

Advertisers were scared and still are. In Garrison, where the head printing office is located, we have two delicious dine-in restaurants that are struggling to keep staff paid and diners safe. The back page of the McLean County Independent was once highly sought after for entertainment and dining advertising. Today, we struggle to fill the page.

We're doing OK. Not great. Not horrible. We've managed to continue to produce newspapers that the public needs and wants. Subscriptions are up because people want to know what is going on their communities.

Here's what would happen if insurance public notice legals were eliminated. I hate to use the argument that a few of our newspapers are staying afloat because of the influx of those out-of-state public notice dollars, but there are at least two of our papers, and possibly four that would suffer another serious blow. All of our newspapers would feel it significantly. First a tight economy for ag related businesses, then COVID, then growing unemployment and still COVID. It's too much to ask this industry that is so essential to our local economies.

I can tell you about the readership of newspapers and how many people aren't going online to even check the free online newspaper we give them with a paid print subscription. I can tell you that many of our rural folks still don't have great internet service.

But here's what I want you to think long and hard about before you would consider voting to eliminate this out-of-state insurance revenue. I was the Sarah Elmquist Squires before Steve Andrist at the newspaper association. When I lobbied for five sessions, we saw this same bill twice. Again, it was the insurance commissioner who thought it was a little too much work for his office. It's not. The NDNA staff does all the placement, billing and collection. Each time – like probably today – the insurance companies never came forward to say they couldn't afford the small notice in the newspapers that keeps them a little more honest and transparent.

I hope you'll give this bill a strong "no." We don't need one more hit on the economy of the weekly newspapers, which are the glue that holds our small towns together.

Thank you for your consideration. Please vote "no" on HB1062.

Jill Denning Gackle