

Local journalism needs federal support

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The fate of local news in America may depend on what Oregon's senior Senator Ron Wyden, does in the next few days.

In addition to all the other major tax issues that have fallen to the Senate Finance Committee, which Wyden chairs, the panel is also considering a less expensive but hugely important provision: a payroll tax credit to help local newspapers, TV and radio stations and websites to hire and retain local reporters.

This is essential because local news is collapsing around the country. Because the internet has destroyed local news business models, there has been a 60 percent drop in the number of reporters since 2000. Thousands of communities have no newspapers or "ghost newspapers" that barely cover communities.

Studies have proved what we know intuitively: when there are fewer local reporters, there's more government waste, corruption. Just as important, it's harder for neighbors to know each other and for communities to solve their own problems. Voting goes down. Participation goes down. The information vacuums are filled with misinformation and conspiracy.

As the Edwin L. Artzt dean and professor at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, I have a front row seat for the monumental changes in local journalism. We send interns into Oregon newsrooms every summer and many of our graduates are employed in local print, broadcast and

internet newsrooms. The COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting advertising losses, only exacerbated economic fissures threatening the flow of information to citizens.

Fortunately, Congress is right now considering a simple proposal that could save local news. It provides a tax credit to publishers and stations to help pay the salary of a local reporter.

It would infuse \$38 million over five years to approximately 113 newsrooms in Oregon.

No one loves the idea of news organizations getting money from the government. But this particular idea is constructed in a clever, First Amendment friendly approach. All news organizations — regardless of ideology — would be eligible for the tax credit as long as they have local reporters. There's no government bureaucrat deciding what news organizations benefit. That's why it has strong bipartisan support: the original co-author is Rep. Dan Newhouse, a Republican, from Washington state.

This provision is on the edge of being included in the Build Back Better legislation. Because it's a tax credit, its fate will be decided by the Senate Finance Committee. Senator Wyden is already a co-sponsor of the bill. He is in a unique position to make it become law. It's a small amount of money compared to the \$1.75 trillion bill but its impact on saving democracy may be profound.

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