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Legislature Sends Journalism Commission to Governor's Desk

Commission language included in Economic Development Package

BOSTON (1/8/2021) -- State Representative Lori Ehrlich (D-Marblehead) and State Senator Brendan Crighton (D-Lynn) announced Thursday the inclusion of their journalism commission legislation, An Act establishing a commission to study journalism in underserved communities, as part of [the Economic Development bill](#) passed by the legislature and sent to the Governor's desk.

This legislation, filed for the first time this session, would create a state commission to assess the state of local journalism in Massachusetts, including the adequacy of press coverage in the Commonwealth's cities and towns and the sustainability of local press business models.

According to research at the University of North Carolina, almost 1,800 local newspapers have closed since 2004, creating growing "media deserts" with insufficient local news coverage. Hedge funds, which have higher profit margin requirements than journalism tends to generate, have recently purchased several news outlets in Massachusetts subsequently consolidating outlets and cutting staff.

"A lack of local news coverage is a fundamental threat to our democracy and civic society," said Ehrlich. "Citizens rely on hardworking journalists to tell the stories that bind us together as communities. Trusted news sources provide a public square where shared facts and thoughtful opinion enable us to hold power to account and govern ourselves."

“With this commission, the Commonwealth will facilitate a serious discussion among experts, reporters, and industry members about the state of local news in Massachusetts, and what fortification efforts can take place,” Ehrlich added.

“Now more than ever we need a strong and robust news media to keep our citizenry as informed as possible and to ensure accountability,” said Crighton. “It was great to work with Representative Ehrlich on this pivotal piece of legislation and I’m excited for the Commission to get to work.”

“I would like to thank Representative Ehrlich for her unremitting commitment to journalism within the Commonwealth,” said State Representative Edward F. Coppinger (D-Boston), House Chair of the Joint Committee on Community Development and Small Business. “Many communities here in Massachusetts both rely on and benefit from local news sources to obtain important information relevant to their livelihoods. These uncertain and trying times have had a significant impact on local news reporting agencies and their ability to disseminate necessary facts. We are honored to join Representative Ehrlich in combating these negative results through this crucial legislation.”

“This is great news for the future of local journalism in Massachusetts. It gives us an opportunity to study where the problems are, who’s doing it right and how we can encourage the growth of independent community news organizations,” said Dan Kennedy, Professor at the School of Journalism at Northeastern University.

“Local news outlets are the bedrock upon which American democracy is built, yet they are collapsing from the negative effects of decades of corporate media consolidation and now the coronavirus pandemic,” said Jason Pramas, Executive Director at the Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism and Executive Editor and Associate Publisher at DigBoston. “The passage of the journalism commission language into law gives hope to Massachusetts journalists and the public-at-large that state government will take a serious look at this ongoing crisis and then take steps to support news organizations around the Commonwealth—in ways that keep the press free and independent, as the Founders intended.”

“Thanks very much to Representatives Ehrlich and Coppinger and Senator Crighton for their leadership on this signal piece of legislation and to all the dozens of journalists, journalism educators, and media activists that worked hard for its enactment,” he added.

The commission will conduct a comprehensive, non-binding study relative to communities underserved by local journalism, including, but not limited to, the ratio of residents to media outlets, the history of local news in Massachusetts, print and digital business models for media outlets, the impact of social media on local news, strategies to improve local news access, public policy solutions to improve the sustainability of local press business models and private and nonprofit solutions, and identifying career pathways and existing or potential professional development opportunities for aspiring journalists in Massachusetts.