

A new newspaper blooms in La Conner

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Tulips aren't the only thing emerging in Skagit County right now. A local news startup, the La Conner Community News, started printing a physical newspaper and saw its subscriptions more than double over the last week.

This is a remarkable turn of events for a community that rallied last year to save its century-old local newspaper, only to see it close in December. That happens all too often. A third of America's local newspapers, more than 3,000 of them, closed over the last two decades. That's left more than half of U.S. counties with little to no local news coverage, according to a tally by Northwestern University's Medill School.

Interventions to stop the decline appear stalled in Congress. But a handful of states have passed or proposed policies to save remaining newsroom jobs and boost journalism startups.

La Conner is a lucky exception. The new outlet is filling a void created when the La Conner Weekly folded in December. A group of residents raised roughly \$30,000 to acquire the Weekly. But that wasn't enough for retiring owner Ken Stern, who opted to shutter the business instead.

The group then turned to news and tech industry veteran Kari Mar, who had also tried to acquire the paper from Stern.

Backed by the local group, Mar and her team launched the nonprofit La Conner Community News online in February and delivered its first weekly print edition last Thursday. "In 90 days they pulled out a miracle," La Conner Mayor Marna Hanneman said.

Staffers and volunteers hand-delivered the 12-page debut edition to every home they could find in La Conner. They also dropped 650 copies at the Swinomish Reservation and 300 at schools.

The introductory edition was free. To get this Thursday's edition people will have to subscribe or pay \$2 for a copy at local stores and coffee shops. Subscriptions more than doubled after the first copies arrived, Mar said, from around 100 to around 300, and cash donations to support the venture surged past \$50,000. New subscriptions covered the cost of printing the first 3,000 copies.

Mar, 48, said she wished she “could have bottled the feeling of celebration” among volunteers and donors last week. “That feeling is so pervasive in the town,” she said. “We haven’t come across anyone in the town that isn’t excited to have a print newspaper.”

Hanneman confirmed that’s the case. “It affects every one of us,” the mayor said. “Several people have said that when they opened the paper — I could feel it too — the emotion was just overwhelming, that this really happened.”

The new outlet has the equivalent of three and a half full-time employees, including Mar. It will add another in the next week or two, she said. Although they are taking a traditional route with print, the Community News crew is going the opposite direction as the newspaper industry in other ways.

Most newspapers have cut their print editions and some have eliminated print altogether as they stake their future online. Chain newspapers in particular have also sold their office buildings. The La Conner staff worked remotely to start but decided they needed a place to gather and a presence in town, so they rented an office off the downtown boardwalk.

Also unlike the newspaper industry, which was historically male dominated, La Conner Community News is starting with three women in charge.

Mar, who worked at The Seattle Times before starting a tech career, is editor and publisher. Cascadia Daily News veteran Staci Baird is managing editor and Casey Lynn is creative director. Bill Reynolds, a former La Conner Weekly reporter, works part time, as does photographer Nancy Crowell.

That’s enough staff to qualify for the news grant program under consideration in Washington state’s Legislature. The proposal would raise a surcharge on tech platforms benefiting from news content of up to \$6 million apiece. That would fund annual grants of around \$13,000 to \$15,000 per full-time newsroom employee at digital, print and broadcast news outlets. “That would be incredible, it brings tears to the eyes,” Mar said when I described the proposal. Grants “would take quite a lot of pressure off,” she said.

State Rep. Clyde Shavers, a Whidbey Island Democrat who represents La Conner, co-sponsored a bill to help news outlets receive a break on state business taxes that passed the House unanimously. But he hasn’t signed on to sponsor the journalism grant legislation, which originated in the Senate and is in limbo until the budget is finalized.

Still, Shavers said “it’s great” that the new paper has launched. “I’m glad,” he said. “We’re not a news desert in La Conner.”

Meanwhile, Mar is focused on building ad revenue and the million other things it takes to report what’s happening, produce a newspaper, launch a new venture and find a path to

sustainability. “We’re so lucky because we have enormous community support and we have supportive businesses that want to buy ads,” she said. “The thing I’m racing against is my own time and personal bandwidth.”

I hope there’s enough of that luck to build a sustainable operation. That will be hard but Hanneman said it’s unlikely that La Conner Community News will go the way of its predecessor and so many others.

“I don’t think this town is going to let that happen,” she said. “It truly is special.”

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