

MAXINE E. DEXTER, MD
STATE REPRESENTATIVE

DISTRICT 33



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

To: Members of the House Committee on Rules

Date: February 9, 2023

Subject: Support HB 2605

Chair Fahey, Vice Chairs Breese-Iverson and Kropf, and members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Dr. Maxine Dexter and I am honored to be the State Representative for House District 33, which includes NW & Downtown Portland, Linnton, and Cathedral Park. I am grateful for this opportunity today to testify in support of HB 2605, the Protect Local Journalism Act.

As legislators, it is our prerogative to provide constituents with transparency and accessibility as they navigate change and challenges in our communities. How and what we do is often covered in the press and the knowledge that we are accountable to our voters is reinforced by the knowledge that a free and robust press will be there to hold us accountable should we stray. From Portland to Pendleton, accountability is optimally delivered through local journalism; neighborhood newsrooms function not only to house community-informed news, but also to hold leaders accountable – as Hayes and Lawless, two academics who have extensively written about the role of the press in government write, “a robust local news media by no means ensures good government, but its absence almost guarantees worse government.”¹

Oregonian’s access to robust journalism is not distributed equally across geographical and sociopolitical regions. Only eight out of Oregon’s 36 counties have one or two outlets that provide civic affairs reporting². This means that a significant proportion of Oregonians have no local news source to keep them apprised of what their local leaders are doing and why. As an undergrad I earned bachelor degrees in both editorial journalism and political science while doing my pre-med requirements. I worked for the university as well as the local newspaper, and learned first-hand the importance of being curious, asking questions and being unafraid to challenge those in power. It is clear that our free press is effectively a fourth branch of government – the one that works to optimize accountability and responsiveness to the public. Government without a free press is not unlike having a justice system without sufficient defense attorneys – the system doesn’t work unless both sides are experienced and effective. This is supported by increasing evidence that the civic health of a community is tied to the presence of a local news source.

¹ Erik Peterson, Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless. News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 86, Issue 2, Summer 2022, Pages 418–420, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfac005>

² <https://agorajournalism.center/newsecosystem22/the-civic-importance-of-local-news-ecosystems/>

House Bill 2605 takes action to build and sustain news ecosystems throughout Oregon. This piece of legislation will empower Oregon Rural Journalism and the University of Oregon Agora Journalism center to conduct research and assist news operations in building sustainable business models and ensuring the longevity of reputable local news³.

This is a bill that looks towards the future of our democracy, and acts to rebuild community trust in journalistic efforts. In 2020, as I would leave my ICU shifts caring for COVID-19 patients and families, I would enter a political landscape of rampant misinformation. We are living in an era of deep skepticism and distrust in the reliability of reporting. This is not a desired outcome, and it is one we have the power to address. Local news sources, staffed by people who live, work and raise families in the community, can help our communities regain confidence in their local news sources. When an article resonates it is often due to a sense of familiarity which increases credibility. This helps establish a foundation of shared facts and understanding which is critical to helping inform Oregonians on the issues that matter most.

When our local news outlets flourish, so does our democracy – to invest in the health of local journalism is to ensure a brighter future for all Oregonians. I am grateful for your attention and consideration today.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maxine Dexter', with a stylized, cursive script.

Representative Maxine Dexter, M.D.
House District 33 (NW & Downtown Portland, Linnton, & Cathedral Park)

³ <https://forjournalism.org/>