

Written statement by Quinton Smith of YachatsNews

Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Bonham, and Members of the Senate Rules Committee

My name is Quinton Smith. I'm the editor and board chair of YachatsNews, a 6-year-old 501c3 nonprofit that operates a 24/7 local news website in Lincoln County. I'm testifying in support of Senate Bill 437.

I'm going to give you a bit of history of our operation because it may help illustrate the issue of "news deserts" – or more accurately "newspaper deserts" -- in many parts of rural Oregon.

I've spent more than 50 years in the news business, from small weeklies to mid-sized dailies. The last 25 years of my "paid" news career was as an editor at The Oregonian.

We moved to Yachats in 2017 and immediately noticed we had moved into an area where there was no local news reporting of our little retirement and tourist town. I started YN out of my own pocket as a volunteer community service project in 2019, and met with strong readership.

We slowly expanded our coverage, using freelancers and other news partners. We became a 501c3 nonprofit in 2022 and hired our first full-time reporter in 2023. Our second full-time reporter joined us last week and is based in Newport to cover county government, the city of Newport, schools and education, housing and social services. No one else is doing that work. We pay a living wage and bear all employee health insurance costs.

Although staff is small, in March, we will have twice the number of reporters and editors in Lincoln County as the Salem-based newspaper chain that owns the only printed newspaper in the county. At the end of this month we are changing our name to Lincoln Chronicle to better reflect our increased and broader coverage.

In 2024, YachatsNews had more than 2 million page views – a 22 percent increase over 2023. As of this morning, our monthly page views – the standard metric for digital news sites -- are 200,000 – not bad for a county of 50,000 people.

Our goal is public information. We provide all types of news stories – large features, day-to-day coverage of local governments, breaking news, briefs, entertainment news, advertising for local businesses and organizations and content from news partners all around Oregon.

YachatsNews is a 501c3 nonprofit, one of the growing number of nonprofits helping provide news in communities not served or served well by transitional newspapers. We fund our operations from monthly and yearly donations from readers, advertising, and small grants from Oregon foundations.

Our content is NOT behind a paywall, unlike newspapers.

The goal of YachatsNews is public service through professionally reported and edited news. We believe information – especially local information -- is important. Our goal is dissemination of information free to the public. Public and/or legal notices are one small part of that effort to provide information. Those notices should not be the sole, legally-required domain of newspapers who often do not report on local communities and are largely behind paywalls or require subscriptions.

Local governments in our county, whether they are in Yachats, Waldport, Newport, Depoe Bay and elsewhere should have the opportunity – NOT the requirement – to publish their notices in the places where they get the most readership. Let the local governments decide where they get the most bang for their buck.

Please take a look at the testimony of the Ashland News board which provides a higher-level view of the news environment in Oregon.

Oregon's newspaper industry has raised all kinds of so-called "red flags" about this legislation – all of which have been countered in a similar bill on the House side.

To modernize public notice laws while safeguarding credibility, we agree it is essential to establish clear eligibility standards for digital publishers. This ensures legitimate news organizations can participate while preventing misuse by hobbyists or non-journalistic entities.

- For example, a legitimate digital publisher could or should meet some or all of the following criteria:
- Be a registered business in Oregon with a valid state and local business license.
- Have a minimum time of (it could be one or two years) of continuous operation to ensure stability.
- Regularly produce original local news content, rather than relying solely on press releases or syndicated content.
- Maintain a paywall-free section for public notices to ensure unrestricted public access.
- Operate a dedicated news website, rather than relying only on social media platforms.
- Be indexed by search engines to ensure public accessibility and transparency.
- Employ at least one full-time journalist or editor to maintain professional editorial standards.

In summary:

- Public notices should prioritize public access, not newspaper revenue.
- SB 437 gives local government the flexibility to determine where some public notices are published while ensuring the best value for taxpayers.
- Digital news platforms meet and often exceed transparency standards.
- SB 437 strengthens local journalism by ensuring that digital publications receive equitable consideration in public notice placement, promoting local news sustainability.
- Opposition from legacy print publishers is based on financial self-interest, not public benefit.