

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

My name is David Sommers, and I serve on the Board of Directors of Ashland.news, a nonprofit digital-first newsroom dedicated to independent, community-driven journalism in Ashland and Southern Oregon.

I'm also a longtime local news veteran: first as the CEO of California's Pacific Community Media and more recently as the inaugural publisher of the Rogue Valley Times and former chief revenue officer at Oregon's EO Media Group. That experience—seeing what could become of SB 686 in Oregon and what happened when similar legislation in California was proposed—gives me a practical lens on what legislative efforts can truly help local journalism thrive and what might unintentionally harm local, independent newsrooms.

First, I want to offer my sincere thanks to Senator Pham and her staff for taking the time to meet with me, hear my concerns and perspective, and thoughtfully incorporate several of those suggestions into the amended bill. That level of engagement matters, and it's appreciated.

Four years ago, Ashland lost its daily newspaper. But we didn't lose journalism. Like many communities across Oregon, we've seen new digital-first outlets, broadcasters, and innovative, locally-owned media models emerge to fill the gaps left behind by corporate consolidation and closures.

The three-year-old nonprofit Ashland.news is now a financially sustainable newsroom with several local employees serving our community with daily, in-depth coverage. We are adding editorial roles and deepening our local connections through events and outreach.

Elsewhere across Oregon, success stories are taking shape. On the coast, the six-year-old Yachats News just hired its second full-time reporter and expanded its coverage area by rebranding as the Lincoln Chronicle just last week. Literally tomorrow, the Pulitzer Prize-winning team behind Lookout Santa Cruz is launching Lookout Eugene-Springfield—a new digital newsroom that will be one of the largest in the state from day one. In Eastern Oregon and the Columbia Basin, Elkhorn Media Group's robust community coverage shows that even in places with newspaper deserts, there is no shortage of journalism. The largest newsroom in Southern Oregon is the local and independent NBC5/KOBI-TV, owned and led by two generations of the Smullin family for over 70 years.

These are the outlets creating jobs, keeping revenue in Oregon, and reinvesting in the communities where legacy media conglomerates have instead repeatedly cut coverage and jobs.

As someone who led a California newsroom during the debate over the California Journalism Preservation Act (CJPA) and who watched a similar effort there unravel, I can't help but advocate caution. CJPA triggered strong backlash from the very platforms it relied on. Meta pulled news from Facebook and Instagram in Canada in response to a similar law, and Google ran a quiet experiment in Europe removing news links. Traffic dipped only slightly. Ad revenue stayed the same. They learned they can live without news.

Can we?

If platform retaliation cuts off referral traffic, independent outlets like Ashland.news suffer the most. That's why the structure of this bill matters so much. We're told that legal remedy is available if the platforms retaliate. But the idea that a newsroom like Ashland could afford to sue Google or Meta is unrealistic.

While the amendment made valuable, inclusive and important improvements, the bill still relies heavily on headcount-based funding. That model rewards size, not service. Corporate chains with hollowed-out local presence could still receive the lion's share of the money. Meanwhile, smaller publishers with deep local connections could receive far less.

There is progress in the bill's creation of the Oregon Civic Information Consortium, and I support its intent. But independent publishers need a meaningful voice in how that funding is governed. The current board structure does not guarantee that. Without that inclusion, there's a real risk that the legacy media model continues to be prioritized over the future of local journalism.

To be clear, I applaud this bill's intention and evolution. It's trying to do something important. But I want to be honest about who it currently supports, and who it could leave behind if Google and Meta shut off news.

The most exciting journalism innovation in Oregon right now is not coming from the legacy institutions. It's coming from local, independent, community-rooted organizations with small budgets and big impact. We need to make sure this bill recognizes that.

Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to speak today.