

LOWER WISCONSIN RIVER VALLEY SENTINEL

Spring Green, Wisconsin



... AND NO PUBLIC RECORDS FOR YOU

WELCOME TO RICHLAND COUNTY
Home of UW-Platteville Richland

CLOSED

Inside this edition

Legal Editor's Column: Why we're suing Lone Rock
Page 2

Community Calendar: Live Music, MLK Book Club
Page 3

Editorial: UW Richland in court
Page 3

January marks end of Sauk County COVID-19 testing sites

Public Health Sauk County has announced that Sauk County COVID-19 testing sites will be closing temporarily after January 15, due to lack of use. These sites, located in Spring Green, Reedsburg, and Baraboo, were set up in partnership with local emergency medical services.

The final testing clinic in Spring Green will be held on January 15 from 5:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. at the Spring Green Fire/EMS station, located at 327 S Winsted Street. To register for a test at this location, individuals must use the COVID Connect System at <https://covidconnect2.wi.gov/#/> login and also register at <https://www.springgreenems.com>.

"We are incredibly grateful for our partnership with Spring Green Fire/EMS, Reedsburg Ambulance Service, and Baraboo EMS to help coordinate these COVID-19 testing sites,"

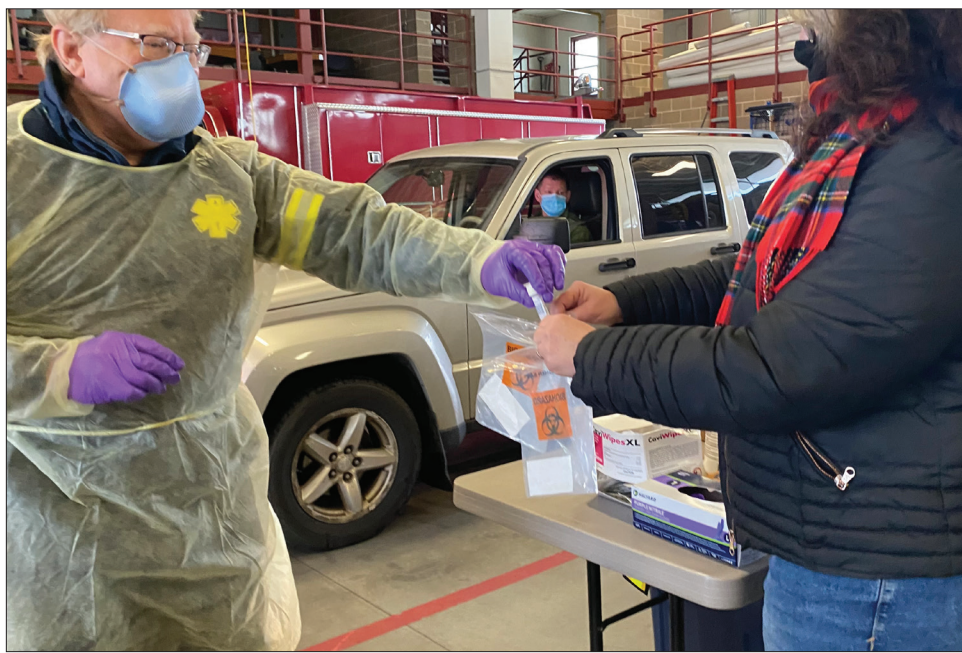


Photo by Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief
EMS Chief Derek Miller, left, hands volunteer Kathy Santos a completed COVID-19 swab test December 2020 at the weekly testing site at the Spring Green Fire Department.

said Andrea Zuther, COVID Nurse Supervisor at Public Health Sauk County. "Despite these testing sites coming to an end, know that there continue to be options available if you would like to get free COVID tests."

Individuals can order one free package of five at-home COVID-19 tests per month from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services at sayyescovidhometest.org, or can get four free at-home COVID-19 tests from the federal government at covid.gov/tests. For help placing an order, individuals can call 1-800-232-0233.

For questions about COVID-19, testing sites, or vaccines, individuals can contact Public Health Sauk County at 608-355-3290 and select option #3 to leave a message. The COVID Response Team will make every effort to respond within 24 hours, although the phone is not monitored on weekends.

River Valley ARTS Creative Community and Artistic Development Grant applications available

Melinda Van Slyke, River Valley ARTS

Do you have an idea for innovative arts programming that will benefit the River Valley Area? Are you an artist who would like support for your individual learning and development? If so, River Valley ARTS is here to help! Creative Community and Artistic Development grant applications will be available at www.RiverValleyARTS.org in early January 2023. Deadline to apply will be late February 2023. Maximum award amount is \$2,500.

Creative Community Grants

The purpose of the Creative Community Grant is to stimulate creative and innovative arts programming in the River Valley area. Proposed projects could include public exhibits, performances, publications, and educational activities. Disciplines could include dance, theater, music, folk arts, literary arts, visual arts, video and film. Priority is given to projects that maximize community involvement and community benefit. Priority will also be given to applicants who don't

have access to other funding sources.

Funding for Creative Community Grants is made possible by the generous support of local donors and businesses with matching funds from the Wisconsin Arts Board.

Artistic Development Grants

The purpose of the Artistic Development Grant is to support an individual's arts project or artistic learning and development. Possible use of Artistic Development Grant money could include expenses related

to projects in the visual or performing arts, to help cover short-term courses, workshops, materials and supplies, and art/music classes or camps. Any professional artist, amateur artist, or student in the River Valley is eligible to apply for the Artistic Development Grant. Criteria for evaluating Artistic Grant applications are individual benefit, educational benefit, financial need, and community benefit. Funding for Artistic Development Grants is made possible by the generous support of local donors and businesses.

River Valley Community Chorus welcomes new singers

Nancy Cullen, RVCC Board Member

The River Valley Community Chorus welcomes new singers to

join them in the Musicians Unite to Fill an Empty Table concert in the afternoon, April 23, 2023, at St.

Luke's Catholic Church in Plain. The River Valley Community Chorus will perform jointly with students from

the River Valley High School Music
continued on page 7

EDITOR'S COLUMN

It's our first edition of the new year, and while I have a love-hate relationship with New Year's resolutions, we wanted to take some time to share a few resolutions we are making, in hopes to give our community and readers what's needed through our publication.

In October 2022, we passed the anniversary of our second full calendar year of publication. However, due to when Valley Sentinel started publishing at the end of 2020, 2023 will technically be the 4th calendar year in which we've published an edition. You'll see this reflected on our volume number on our cover.

We've shared many times the story of how we started this small business by building a desk, cashing in savings bonds and working hard to make a dream come true. We started very small and have had some tremendous growth since the days of building a desk, but it hasn't always been easy (something we share with our readers semi-regularly as well).

While we've had some amazing growth throughout our time, we're still very much a grassroots, small business. There is still only a small handful of dedicated, passionate volunteers making this happen each edition and we're always doing the best we can. Part of doing the best we can does mean changing things that aren't working, or refocusing on areas that aren't getting enough attention (and trust us, we've found plenty of each of those things).

You'll notice this edition is again shorter than we'd like. It's certainly not for a lack of content. We're doing work in the background to find the best ways to share and present this content in a way that becomes familiar and easy to engage with. As we start the new year, we are practically bursting at the seams with the ideas we'd like to create, share and put out into the community — but we have a few major resolutions we'd like to focus on, and commit to right here in the first edition of 2023.

The first being a commitment to civic engagement and the watchdog role of news media. The Sentinel in our name implies a certain level of watchdog journalism that we haven't had the resources to consistently commit to in the ways we've wanted. While our resources and manpower haven't necessarily changed, we want to make an effort to refocus on this important piece of our role.

We want to focus on encouraging the community to get more civically involved — whether that means showing up to your local government meetings and speaking at public comment on a topic that's important to you or taking it a step further and getting involved in local government or even getting more community members to vote — we are working on ways to include more content centered around this in each publication.

Currently, we're navigating some growing pains as we mature as a publication. One of those civically-minded aspects of maturing is having filed our first public records complaint. This isn't unfamiliar territory to established news media, and it's not new territory to any of our editors. It's an area that I navigated while covering Sauk County government for Capital Newspapers, wading through public records that were handed over well after they should have been.

Our second major New Year's resolution is committing to finding a way to better highlight and include community contributors, especially arts and culture pieces from our community. We're starting the process in the background of figuring out how best to feature the many writings, artwork, prose, poetry, photos and more from local contributors.

We would like to try and find a way to present more of this and really focus on this part of our wonderful community, because we have so many talented individuals in this area. This may include a poetry section or a preview (or review) of live music or something similar. The ideas are endless on how we do this, but we are excited at the prospect of being able to potentially share more prose, poetry and artwork in a little bit of a different way that engages with our community.

It's important to note that these resolutions won't be made overnight and we're only in month 1 of 12 of this arbitrary year. These will be gradual improvements we are working towards, with our mantra here being progress over perfection and our focus being on providing the community with even more resources and information. We may be navigating those growing pains over here, but with your help, support and involvement, we can truly continue to grow into a publication that serves our entire community.

— Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief

Legal Editor's Column: We're suing Lone Rock over public records, here's why

Gary Ernest Grass, esq., *Legal Editor*

Last Halloween the Village of Lone Rock held a public meeting and did not notify the Valley Sentinel. The next night they held public hearings on their annual budget and a village board meeting. The Valley Sentinel was sent an e-mail notice less than an hour before the meeting started. We asked for various public records related to these matters and got nothing. The village clerk told us we were not entitled to notice, and past notices had merely been given as a courtesy.

Now we're suing.

There were lots of reasons for us not to sue. You might think we rushed into this without considering those reasons. If so, you would be wrong.

We know that the ideals of government transparency sound abstract, and it's hard to talk about them without sounding self-righteous and clichéd. In the real world, looking at something at the level of a village, they seem less important. The village says it informed its citizens in other reliable ways, and we have no strong reason to doubt that. They weren't trying to deliberately shut out the media to hide dirty secrets or operate in the dark so they could engage in corruption. It's all local stuff and in small towns if anything were amiss word would get around anyway. So what's the big deal, actually?

Plus, these are not well-paid full time career politicians that run million dollar campaigns to get elected or go on junkets funded by industries seeking to peddle influence. These are our local friends and neighbors who have noble reasons for wanting to get involved. Dragging them into court or making them pay fines will only discourage civil involvement.

All that is true.

Furthermore, the paper is taking a risk that it will alienate local leaders and citizens that it relies upon as sources, readers, and advertisers.

So why?

Because at the end of the day we still consider this a vitally important issue. Because we believe the press has a solemn duty to fight for the principles of transparency, because the law is on our side, and because this is not just an ordinary lapse or mistake, but something far more egregious.

First, recall that this was not just a couple of ordinary meetings and documents. There are meetings and records concerning the village's annual budget. This is one of the most important things that any unit of local government decides, and it has special protection under law. Summaries of proposed budgets are supposed to be made available to the public well in advance, Public hearings are required. Most municipalities are required to

place a paid "Class 1 Notice" in the official paper for the locality. Once set, the budget has a legal force that cannot simply be undone. It restricts spending for the whole year unless special procedures are used to enact changes. So that makes this a much bigger deal than the average meeting.

It is also considered one of the core functions of our transparency laws that the people be able to see how public monies are being spent. In part this comes from the public experience with greed and waste. It would be wrong to think that the only concern is outright corruption. Well meaning people may direct funds to vendors they know not because they're getting some kind of a kickback, but because they honestly think the one they know is the best or only alternative. Opening up the process is a way of making officials aware of appearances of conflict they might overlook, and allowing better alternatives to come to light.

We don't think officials in Lone Rock are crooks, but could greater transparency have benefited them? Well, it's hard for us to say when we can't get most of the records.

Second, the clerk's comment that she believes no notice to the press is required is alarming. Our understanding is that the clerk in Lone Rock, like the clerk in most villages, has been designated the responsibility of sending out notice to the press and the public. Someone in that position should know what is required. She also does not seem to have acknowledged the public's right to inspect or receive public documents. Providing access to government records is described by statute as one of the core responsibilities of public officials. If she believes access to meetings and records is just a courtesy, how many times might she have failed to provide that "courtesy"?

In the case of media notices, it seems like she may be confusing "Public Notice" with notice "to the public," which is admittedly a pretty easy mistake to make. The Wisconsin statutes have a section called "Public Notice" which states that notice must be given to two classes of public media and also directly to the public. (The Valley Sentinel is in one of these classes: media who have requested in advance to be notified of any public meetings.) A section of the law allows notice "to the public" to be provided in various ways, including posting in designated places or online. But this does not discharge the independent duty to inform the media. The legislature thought that informing the press was independently important because the press can play a vital role, not just transmitting the notice to the people, but also looking deeper,

investigating, commenting, bringing out different perspectives and connections. We believe that as well.

Essentially, there are two kinds of mistakes a public official can make with respect to a public duty: first, the duty can be executed imperfectly, or not executed, because of inadvertence or excusable neglect; second, the duty can be rejected altogether, either because the official sees as not being a duty at all. The second is much more serious.

The final factor worth discussing here is that each failure here was, with respect to the Valley Sentinel, absolute or near absolute. Many times people sue over public records because they received most of the records, but not all. They disagree with something being redacted. Copies were not clear. The response was late. They were overcharged. They complain about meeting notices that were late, unclear, or had missing information. There was some effort to comply with the statute, in other words, but there were errors.

In this case, the Valley Sentinel has waited over two months and received no records, and no acknowledgement that any will ever be provided. Under the law, records are to be provided as soon as practicable and without delay. The Department of Justice has long recommended that records be provided within 10 days, or if that is not possible, that the custodian of records send within 10 days an acknowledgement of the request and an estimated time for completion. So it hasn't been a small error, but as far as we can tell, a complete failure or rejection of the law.

Similarly, the Valley Sentinel did not receive late or incomplete notice or the October 31 meeting — we received no notice at all. The notice for the November 1 public hearing and board meeting came less than an hour before the meeting. The standard is 24 hours — two in an emergency. Here, not even one. This is more than a small mistake.

We acknowledged at the outset that talk about the ideals of open government often sounds self-righteous and clichéd, but it is still something we believe in. We think it is integral to the idea of democracy. If our ideal is government by the people, for the people, then government meetings are the people's meetings, and government records are the people's records. Having access to these things is part and parcel of the government not being some external force that we deal with at arm's length, but something that is a part of us, that we do.

We don't think every little mistake merits a lawsuit. But we think with issues this important, we need to be vigilant. And in this case, the violations were far too serious to just ignore.

ON THE COVER

"County line, Lone Rock, Wisconsin" (2023)
Mixed media/digital, by Valley Sentinel/AI/
Public Domain



With the many things going on in Lone Rock and Richland County covered by this edition, we wanted to put together an illustration that created a representation of the issues raised.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,
The UW System has promised a proposal for UW Platteville Richland. This is welcome news, and we are hopeful that they will cooperate with us. However, the annexation of Richland campus to UW Platteville reduced by 55% our financial support from both UW System and UW Platteville. Our Dean's position, a recruiter, 11 of 18 faculty members, Student Services staff, the International Coordinator, the Continuing Education Director—similarly all gone. We've also lost the marketing and strategic plan, and Youth Options and Academic Alliance programs were ended. As one of the UW Colleges, we were the third largest institution within the system, and

especially important for this poor rural area, we had the lowest cost per student for the UW System.

The campus has tremendous community support, including from our Foundation, a leader among all 13 colleges. Being near Madison in a rural setting with a 134-acre campus and a 192-acre wooded and tillable farm for campus use, we are ideally set to be associated with UW Madison's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Nearby are large farms associated with Organic Valley. These features, along with our modern labs on campus, would provide ideal space for research in many areas of agriculture and environmental studies.

Richland Campus has been a hub for

International students since 1986, most of whom started here and transferred to UW Madison. Our faculty and staff all had professional training on how best to support students from different cultures, and the community hosted and mentored them. We brought the USA to them and they brought the world to us.

We have multiple attributes valuable to higher education. The campus is located in a beautiful environment that supports the Wisconsin Idea, exemplifying how all colleges could be revived and offer what the Regents want: affordability and accessibility.

Kay Ziegahn,
Richland Center, Wisconsin

EDITORIAL

UW-Richland will not be saved outside the courtroom, action is needed now

The County and the community were disheartened just over a month ago when a unilateral directive from University of Wisconsin System President Jay Rothman directed the administration of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville Richland campus in Richland Center to start winding down operations and to plan to discontinue in-person instruction starting fall 2023, with the directive also promising a transition plan that floated the red herring ideas of online instruction and continuing education.

It's become increasingly clear that the only way to save UW-Richland is inside a courtroom.

A cursory review of the 1966 agreement between the County and the UW System indicates to this editorial board that it's not even clear that Rothman's unilateral directive is legal. This alone, in addition to the many other various ways the community and the County are about to be harmed, is reason enough to play this out in a courtroom.

The 1966 agreement for the County-owned campus lays out a structure of shared responsibilities, with the County maintaining the buildings and grounds and the UW System maintaining the campus as an instructional institution itself. The agreement is set to continue in perpetuity and the lease between the County and the UW System isn't set to expire until 2042.

It takes a vote of the UW System Board of Regents to close a campus down. But that's not yet - what Rothman's directive purports to do, technically.

Legally, it is significant that UW-Richland is not an "institution" but merely a "campus." If it were independent, with its own chancellor, any fundamental change to its mission would have to go through public hearings. Fundamental responsibility for changing that mission would belong to the chancellor, not the system president.

Because it is now merely a campus, the process for closing or fundamentally changing Richland's role is streamlined, but it's still hard to understand where the UW System President would get this authority. The president has no independent powers and only carries out the directives of the regents. When did the regents direct this?

Also, although the role of the students and faculty was dramatically reduced in 2015, they are still supposed to be participants in advising university policy. What opportunity for formal input did they have?

Moreover, the 1966 agreement specifically lays out the UW System's obligation to maintain the campus, and to provide adequate instructional and administrative staff. The only way the agreement can be terminated is, in June of any given year, if: 1.) the legislature fundamentally changes how the branch campuses operate, 2.) if the legislature doesn't

provide adequate funding. (If you noticed the series missed an "and" or an "or" there, you're not alone — the agreement is missing any sort of conjunction that would indicate whether either or both conditions must apply.) Even if the necessary condition (or conditions) exist for termination, the obtuse language is not clear how the "automatic termination" of the agreement operates or is initiated in practice: what happens if one party thinks that funding is adequate and the other does not, or if they disagree whether a change in branch operations is fundamental?

Rothman's unilateral directive appears to be the best example of breach of contract and financial responsibility the County could ask for in court. Applicable here, the agreement is binding until the state doesn't adequately fund the campus, only then are there potential avenues to exit the agreement. Until that time, the UW System has an obligation to maintain the campus, and to provide adequate instructional and administrative staff.

Rothman's directive is a perfect example of intent by the UW System to not provide adequate instruction or administrative staff — and perhaps he's hoping you'll ignore that until this June when perhaps he believes the UW System can exit the agreement.

Further, one might bet the UW System has no intention of actually providing continuing education or online instruction at the campus — that it is instead an exercise in subterfuge to placate the community and spread out the adverse news until June, when the train that's currently leaving the station cannot be stopped and they believe the UW System can simply exit the agreement. Regardless, let's not mince words, the loss of in-person instruction would mean the constructive closure of the campus.

There's one foolproof way to ensure that Rothman's directive is upheld, legal or not, and that the campus fails to exist as it has — by simply doing nothing.

You may want to wait to see what the UW System's forthcoming proposal is for the future of the campus. You may welcome their promise to cooperate and negotiate with you in good faith. You may quixotically believe that any such usurpation, as Rothman's questionable directive intends, does not become lawful with time. However, the reality is, as much as we may have faith in the courts to make things right, and to sort right from wrong and legal from not, they're not God and they don't play Him on TV, and oftentimes they are forced to sanction the plan that entails the least amount of disruption. When dealing with institutions such as these, there are things that even the courts cannot undo after a time — and we are rapidly approaching that juncture. Any negotiations are a distraction and any forthcoming proposal is, at best, a delay and, at worst, a closure by another name. The County and the community will find themselves "negotiating" with their hands tied behind their back if they don't quickly take legal action.

Remember, the UW System also promised to maintain the campus and provide adequate instruction and administration. When you look at the recent history of funding, instruction, administration and enrollment decisions by the UW System with regard to UW-Richland, the simple "falling enrollment" narrative falls apart. By most measures, the data appears to indicate that this is a long-planned constructive closure and the campus was set up to fail. It becomes easier to see and easier to legally argue that the UW System has failed to maintain and adequately provide funding, instruction and admin for quite some time.

So what can you do?

This is your time to show your support. This is not the time to reminisce about how nice the campus was in the past. This is the time to fight for its future. This is the time to take action and get involved. Urge your County Board to fight this fight in the courtroom. Sign on to a court case with fellow community members to legally address the harm the UW System is threatening to do to you educationally and as taxpayers. Sign a sincere letter of intent that says you would seek education in its many forms at UW-Richland if it continued to provide in-person instruction.

Organize. Sign hundreds of community members onto a lawsuit asserting harm by this constructive closure. If possible, get certified as a class action. Hold regular meetings as a community, with legal counsel, as things progress in court, keeping everyone involved and empowered. Regardless, fight this fight and show the UW System that UW-Richland isn't just a memory, it's a need.

Ask your County Board to take this fight to the courtroom. This sort of fight is part of their job and part of representing your interests. It could be said that the County has the best chance and best legal argument to stop this. Ask them to put together a legal team that knows the UW System and contract law (even better if they take this fight pro bono or on contingency). Push for an immediate request in court for an injunction preserving the status quo that existed before the directive, enjoining the UW System and UW-Platteville from moving forward with winding things down and discontinuing in-person instruction.

Then move forward with a legal challenge to the directive and the ability of the UW System to unilaterally remove itself from its agreement with the County. While the legal fight plays out, in-person instruction continues, giving the community time to organize to secure the campus' future.

With the right legal team, what does the County have to lose by taking this action? The campus is County-owned, they will need to maintain the buildings and grounds as a financial pit if the campus closes anyway. There's so much more to lose by not taking this fight.

We need to be clear: legal action is not the only way to affect policy. Action outside of the court is essential. Public pressure should be put on

the president and the regents to do the right thing; with secondary targets being the chancellor, faculty and students, the public and the legislature. Asking the courts to fix this has many problems of its own: it is slow, expensive and uncertain, and limited by the law. But the courts have one important power that is essential: to freeze the actions of the university so that the community has the chance to mobilize and the president's scheme does not become a fait accompli. It will be much easier to prevent this plan from finishing than it would be to try and undo it once it is complete.

All the while the community, organizations, the UW-Richland Foundation and the County and its Education Committee need to come up with a plan for the campus to succeed, financially and otherwise, for years to come. A court will need to be shown that there is a need and there is a plan, if it is to uphold the agreement and order the UW System to continue to properly maintain the campus, its instruction and administration.

It's time for Richland County and its Board to take action, taking the stance that Rothman's directive isn't legal while posturing to maintain the status quo that existed before the directive and asserting the attitude and policy that the campus isn't closing or discontinuing in-person instruction, now or until at least 2042.

The agreement remains in effect and, while it does, the UW System should not be allowed to discontinue in-person instruction. Continuing education, online education or other offhand proposals intended to placate the community could never have been contemplated to meet the threshold of adequate instruction and intent of the agreement when signed, and they do not. The UW System needs to be held to account and held to their promise to maintain the campus and provide the agreed to adequate instruction and administration.

Should this be fought in the courtroom, and should the UW System be enjoined from winding down, closing the campus or discontinuing in-person instruction while the legal fight continues, this is your time to show the County, the UW System, the Legislature and the Governor that there is interest and a need for UW-Richland and that there is a plan to support it. These public officials need to be lobbied in support of adequate funding of UW-Richland.

This is the time to fight. Attend the next County Board meeting, attend the next County Education Committee meeting, lobby your elected officials, reach out to the Friends of the Campus group and figure out how to organize and get involved.

If you wait and see, or start simply inventorying the campus' assets, you'll lose UW-Richland, the campus' storied history and impact on so many and all the potential it has to impact the educational pursuits of future students — and it's not something you'll ever get back.

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EDITORIAL

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Have graphic design experience or interested in meetings, events or writing and becoming a community contributor? Let us know. Thank you to all of our contributors for believing in our community.

Editorial Policy

On certain topics in areas of great community interest, the editors of the Valley Sentinel may take positions they believe best represent and serve the interests of the community. Any opinions or positions taken by the editorial board are separate and distinct in labeling and substance from the community journalism that appears in the rest of the publication and does not affect the integrity and impartiality of our reporting.

Letter to the Editor Policy

Letters submitted for consideration are subject to fact-checking and editing for space and clarity. Submissions must have a compelling local community interest. Letters to the editor must fit within a 500-word limit, and include name, city and phone number. Phone numbers are for office use only and will not be published. Letters of a political nature, without chance of rebuttal, will not be published the week before an election.

Full and up-to-date policies available at: www.valleysentinelnews.com

Column Policy

Editors may feature opinion columns written by public figures, members of the public or other publication staff. Columns reflect the opinions of the individual contributors and do not represent positions of the publication. Guest columns of an anticipated length more than 500 words should seek prior editor authorization.

Community Discussion Policy

From time to time the editorial board may select letters to the editor of a particular compelling community interest where a public figure or accountable public action is the recipient of criticism and allow, in the same issue, the subject of the criticism chance for rebuttal, with expounded independent input. The format shall be point, counterpoint and expert analysis. This community discussion shall serve as a moderated dialogue that presents multiple views of important community topics.



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Valley Sentinel is an independent, editor-owned, all-volunteer, free bi-weekly news publication, available on newsstands in the area.

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