**Local journalism needs a new ‘Sustainability Act’**

*By Vilas County News Review editorial board*

A bill has been introduced in the House of Representatives named the Local Journalism Sustainability Act, which would provide thousands of dollars in tax credits to most businesses that advertise in community newspapers and credits to citizens who subscribe.

Unfortunately, due to transforming business models and changes to advertising mediums in an age of digital communication and social media, many locally-owned newspapers have been struggling to make ends meet. And the current pandemic has only exacerbated the situation.

Never has America’s free press been more threatened by economic insolvency, a development that could eliminate the work of local journalists who provide in-depth perspectives that inform their readership regarding important current events.

We would argue that newspapers are fundamental to American daily life. No other form of media runs local press releases from businesses, nonprofit organizations, health-care providers and government agencies. Additionally, you cannot get letters to the editor on the radio or television. The only true public forum today, policed by professional journalists, are America’s newspapers.

Local newspapers are also where legal notices are required to be published by governments and individuals seeking to provide public notice on bid offers, sheriff’s sales, public hearings of all kinds, name changes, probate matters, some lawsuits, proposed budgets and tax levies, and numerous other topics.

So how important is supporting the Local Journalism Sustainability Act and ensuring we save our local newspapers? The answer was provided long ago by one of America’s top Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, who wrote: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

The bill provides a credit for advertising in local newspapers and local media for up to five years — up to $5,000 in the first year and up to $2,500 in the subsequent four years. It also provides five years of credits for every taxpayer, up to $250 a year, to spend on subscriptions to local newspapers.

Additionally, the bill calls for a five-year refundable credit to local newspapers to use to compensate journalists, up to $50,000 a year.

We are asking the entire Wisconsin delegation to co-sponsor this important piece of legislation, which was introduced by Reps. Ann Kirkpatrick (D-Ariz.) and Dan Newhouse (R-Wash.) The bipartisan legislation was initially co-sponsored by 18 others.

Local journalists and newspapers are essential to ensuring the public remains informed. They are on the front lines in the battle to prevent fake news from taking over America and its citizenry, especially in rural areas.

***Behind the editorial ‘we’***

*Members of the Vilas County News-Review editorial board include Publisher Kurt Krueger, Editor Gary Ridderbusch and reporters Doug Etten and Michelle Drew.*