**New state bill aims to support local media, small businesses**

*By Julia Hunter, Wisconsin Newspaper Association*

Todd Novak never planned for a career in journalism.

He grew up working on the family farm in Cobb, Wisconsin, and studied finance at Southwest Technical College. He was hired as an accountant at Lands’ End, but after five years in the role, he realized he was not suited to a desk job.

So, he left the company in 1990 at the age of 23 and took a job in the commercial printing department of The Dodgeville Chronicle. A few months after joining the newspaper, editor and co-publisher Pat Reilly found himself in a pinch. He needed someone to cover a county board meeting, so he asked Novak to attend and take detailed notes. Reilly assured Novak — who didn’t have a writing background — that he would write the story himself. Just take notes, he said.

“And I did. I took notes, brought them back to him, and he wrote from my notes and asked me questions [about the meeting],” said Novak, who now serves as state representative for the 51st Assembly District.

He did this a few more times over the next several months until, one day, Reilly encouraged him to write the story himself, reassuring Novak that he had a strong grasp of how government works.

He did, and it wasn’t long before Novak was covering the county board, school board and city council as a reporter for the Chronicle. Within a year, he would become the paper’s associate editor.

At The Chronicle, Novak would spend hours with public officials learning about the inner workings of local government. In a piece published by the newspaper upon Novak’s departure for the Capitol, Novak said “I wanted to understand it because if I didn’t and I wrote about it, our readers would not understand it.”

It was this understanding of local government that prompted several members of the public to encourage Novak to run for Mayor of Dodgeville — an office he has held since 2012.

Novak left the paper in 2015, after being elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly but remains a strong supporter of journalism. He has become the go-to “newspaper guy” at the Capitol, providing feedback to other lawmakers on legislation that affects newspapers, he said.

Novak has opposed attempts to diminish public notice in newspapers and co-sponsored a bill earlier this year that [strengthened the industry’s role](https://wnanews.com/2021/05/28/evers-signs-bill-advancing-states-public-notice-laws/) in their continued publication.

His most recent effort on behalf of Wisconsin news organizations aims to provide financial relief to local media and small businesses that have been pummeled by the COVID-19 pandemic. Introduced Thursday, [Assembly Bill 762](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/proposals/reg/asm/bill/ab762) would give small businesses that purchase advertising in local media outlets a 50% tax credit.

“Our local media outlets have not been immune to the negative impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent workforce challenges,” Novak (R-Dodgeville) and co-author Sen. Roger Roth (R-Appleton) said in an email to legislators seeking sponsors for the bill. “Community focused family-run businesses, including newspapers and radio stations, are in the same perilous position as many retail, hospitality and small manufacturers.

“The advertising incentive creates a win-win scenario for small businesses that want to advertise, [support] customers and workers, and for local media.”

Under the bill, the tax credit would be capped at $5,000 and would expire after five years. Businesses with fewer than 100 full-time employees and less than $10 million in revenue would be eligible to receive the credit and ads would have to be placed with Wisconsin-based media, including newspapers, radio and television stations and online news sites.

The Wisconsin Newspaper Association has been the bill’s lead proponent.

“The best way for local business to reach its intended audience is through local media,” said WNA Executive Director Beth Bennett. “The tax credit created by this legislation will potentially make additional advertising dollars available to enhance that audience messaging. Local advertising, in turn, plays a vital role in sustaining the essential local journalism that sustains our democracy.”

The bill has gained support from several other state trade associations, including the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association, Wisconsin Community Newspapers, Wisconsin Chiropractic Association, Wisconsin Dental Association, Wisconsin Grocers Association, Wisconsin Independent Businesses, Wisconsin Petroleum Marketers and Convenience Store Association, Wisconsin Restaurant Association and the Tavern League of Wisconsin.

The legislation is similar to a provision in the federal Local Journalism Sustainability Act, which was introduced this summer. Despite receiving bipartisan support and 78 sponsors, just a portion of the proposal — a payroll tax credit for local media — was included in President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better plan.

When the original tax credits for advertisers were dropped from the federal legislation, Bennett and Novak decided to move forward.

So far, the proposal has received bipartisan support, with 15 lawmakers signing on as co-sponsors. They include Reps. David Armstrong (R-Rice Lake), Sue Conley (D-Janesville), James Edming (R-Glen Flora), Tony Kurtz (R-Wonewoc), William Penterman (R-Columbus), Jessie Rodriguez (R-Oak Creek), Patrick Snyder (R-Schofield), John Spiros (R-Marshfield), David Steffen (R-Green Bay), Rob Swearingen (R-Rhinelander), Paul Tittl (R - Manitowoc), Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City) and Ron Tusler (R-Harrison), as well as Sens. Brad Pffaf (D-Onalaska) and Patrick Testin (R-Stevens Point).

The bill, referred to the [Committee on Ways and Means](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/committees/assembly/2390), is expected to have a hearing in January.