

Roman Record Offers Weekly Snapshot of Government

By Sean Ireland



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Every week in Rome, Ga., the daily newspaper saves its readers a trip to city hall, the sheriff's office and the health department.

For the last 20 years, citizens of Rome and Floyd County, located in northwest Georgia, haven't had to go to the courthouse to find out what the house down the street sold for, or to the jail to find out why their neighbor was arrested. And they don't have to wonder when the local fast food restaurant was last inspected and what score it earned. They don't have to because that information is gathered for them, neatly put together into

a special section and conveniently delivered to their doorsteps in every Monday edition of the [Rome News-Tribune](#).

In short, that special section, known as the Roman Record, is a compilation of every public record created and kept at the offices of local governments.

It's a weekly snapshot of how government is functioning, and while a picture is worth a thousand words, the Roman Record is worth much more for the Rome News-Tribune. Because of the Record, the Monday edition of the daily newspaper, which has a paid circulation total of about 18,400, has about 1,300 more single copy sales than any other weekday edition. Roman Record generates about \$150,000 annually.

The Record is worth quite a lot to its readers too. While it has business content, with small items and photos from local businesses about new hires, promotions and awards, as well as a feature called the Small-Business Snapshot highlighting a local business, public records are the focus of the section.

"The thing that drives single copy sales is that we put all the arrest reports from Floyd County and Rome police in it, including the time of the arrest, the day and what the charges are," said Publisher Otis Raybon. "We publish decisions from all the criminal courts by judge. As cases are settled and dismissed, we report those. We have a community calendar in there, and we also put in all the building permits issued across a week – who they're issued to and for what amount. We list all property transactions.

"The other thing that gets a lot of reader interest is the health department scores for restaurants. The restaurants don't particularly like it, but it increases awareness of that particular government function."

The newspaper holds nothing back. It publishes lists of the marriages and divorces filed at the county courthouse and all civil court decisions. Monthly it publishes a list of all the items approved for construction with the use of funds from a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax approved by voters, along with an account of sales tax collections in Floyd County.

"There are a couple of red-light cameras in Rome, and they're using the money collected from fines to pay for sidewalk improvements," Raybon said. "We run the revenue the cameras bring in so people can keep up to date on how much they are generating."





Producing Roman Record every week offers the added bonus of keeping the wheels of the information-gathering process greased so that when time is of the essence, obstacles such as ignorance or resistance have already been cleared.

“In that respect, it is also an invaluable news reporting tool and community service. We feel that the open records war is not just fought in the big legal battles. It’s primarily waged day in and day out by staffers who trek down to local agencies every single day and pore over hundreds of records, who educate clerks and public officials and who open the door – not by having lawyers and judges kick it open – but by being a presence and representative of the public every single day,” Raybon said.

The Rome News-Tribune has established a reputation for both its thoroughness and fair treatment of everyone. “We get some complaints occasionally,” Raybon said. “But for the most part there’s rarely a place I go that somebody doesn’t jokingly mention Roman Record. Our response (to people asking to have their names omitted) is always the same. If it’s there in the sheriff’s office or

courthouse, we list it. We list everything.

“Most readers appreciate that the information in there is valid and gives you a good idea of what’s going on in the community.”

Advertising is sold in the section at the Rome News-Tribune’s full open rate. “We encourage ad sales on any other weekday that can pick up into Roman Record,” Raybon added. “It’s a good draw for advertisers because they know that it’s very well read.”

The Rome News-Tribune has an editor who does all of the writing, editing and paginating of the 12-page section with help from a news clerk. “Over the years we’ve established a rapport and helped make the gatekeepers of the process more efficient. What once took several people can now pretty much be done by one,” Raybon said. The content itself – public information – is free, of course.

The service to readers is invaluable. “We think it gives you another reason that when we send you a subscription renewal notice for the Rome News-Tribune, you’ll want to say, ‘Yes, I’ll keep subscribing.’ This is a reflection of what newspapers should be doing for their communities – presenting vital information,” Raybon said.

“You don’t have to do it in tabloid format as we do it,” he added. “Every newspaper could do this and make it successful from public information, revenue and single copy sales standpoints.”

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