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newsroom strategies

Ground Rules for Columns by Public Officials

By Jim Pumarlo

What's the impact of a legislative budget-balancing bill on local schools? How will a proposed change in the market value of commercial/industrial property affect city taxes on residential parcels? Will a proposed constitutional amendment on transportation funding pit metro vs. rural interests?

These are among the myriad issues facing local governing bodies at any given time. These issues also provide excellent fodder for additional explanation by school, city and county officials. Columns on these subjects can be informative and can engage citizens in valuable

community dialogue.

Local officials frequently press editors for a regular column in the name of advancing dialogue with residents. The request is not surprising. What candidate for elective office has not pledged to open the lines of communication.

The caution is that these columns do not become a public relations campaign. They must be substantive, or otherwise the floodgates will open for requests from every special interest.

Here are some ground rules when contemplating regular contributions from public officials:

- The column should be an avenue to elaborate on issues facing the particular entity. It should not be a stage to respond to comments expressed through editorials, letters to the editor or story comments on the Web. Those replies should be handled through normal channels such as letters to the editor.
- The column should be a voice for the specific author – for example, the superintendent, city administrator or county administrator. If the elected officials from those bodies wish to comment on subjects, they have the standard avenues available to other readers.
- The column should be subject to the same review and editing as all other items offered for publication. That does not mean censorship. The authors should have free reign to express their opinions, even if they are contrary to ideas advanced by a newspaper.
- The column should not be a substitute for press releases from the particular body. For example, it's fine if a superintendent wishes to expand on a district's position on busing. But the first public statements on the issue appropriately belong in a news story.
- The column should not be a tool to give the school, city or county "good PR." For example, if school personnel have an idea for a story, they always are welcome to contact the news department. The ideas for school stories – all articles for that matter – should be judged on individual merits.

Editors are right to raise red flags on such column requests if the clear intent is blatant boosterism.

At the same time, these columns can be worthwhile elements on editorial pages and can contribute to the discussion of vital community issues. They can supplement – but should not be a substitute – for newsroom coverage.

Aggressive reporting of local public affairs ranks among the prime responsibilities of the community press. Newspapers are still in the best position to provide the most thorough and credible coverage of these governing bodies that make decisions that affect all aspects of citizens' everyday lives.

At the same time, newsrooms are stretched to dispatch reporters to every meeting or track down every story that might warrant coverage. During these challenging economic times, it seems hardly a week passes without another story surfacing of how the federal stimulus bill or state budget cuts can affect local government budgets and, as a result, your readers.

Newspapers often are challenged by space and resources to publish everything that might be discussed at a meeting or submitted to them for publication. In some instances, subjects might warrant additional explanation in columns by public officials.

The bottom line is that editors should have firm criteria for these columns. As soon as the first one is accepted, others will demand similar treatment. Each request should be evaluated on whether it will enhance the knowledge and debate on issues important to your community.

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