

Newspapers Bring Business to Your City

By Lamar Norton, Executive Director
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Newspaper publishers across Georgia are dedicating a significant bit of time and ink explaining why community newspapers matter. I would like to add my thoughts on the subject. As executive director of the Georgia Municipal Association, the state's largest representative of city governments, I have seen firsthand how newspapers impact cities. To put it simply: Newspapers are economic development.

First, and most basically, most newspaper offices are located in downtowns. They employ people who, hopefully, eat and shop at other downtown businesses. People come to newspaper offices to place ads, share their news and buy their newspapers. So newspapers drive traffic into the downtown area.

They also cover events like ribbon cuttings and business expansions that help local businesses. Think about where you live. If you live in one of Georgia's many smaller towns, it's likely your newspaper is a once or twice-weekly publication. If that newspaper didn't exist, who would cover these events? Would the closest large daily newspaper drive to your town to cover the grand opening of a Mom and Pop store? Probably not. Your community newspaper, however, does cover those events and that coverage helps Mom and Pop and the rest of the family stay in business.

Newspapers also impact the local economy on a much larger scale. The stories they write – how they portray the community and its government leadership – can make or break economic development. Before deciding to open a store or factory in a community, business leaders look at how that community is portrayed in the media. Is it a government that can't agree on issues, that deadlocks on important votes? Or is it a government that seems open to doing business and welcoming to newcomers? If it's a company that will bring a large number of employees to the area, they want to know what the quality of life is going to be for their workers. Are there sports for kids, quality schools, community events for the family? All those factors are taken into consideration and decisions are made based upon how the community is portrayed in the local paper.

Another area where newspapers offer great impact is in recording the history of our cities and the people who live, work and die there. The birth announcement that ran in your paper last week may be the significant event historians examine 80 years from now. The gap-toothed eight-year-old grinning from ear to ear in the Little League photo on the sports page could be the next Ty Cobb. Who else but the local newspaper is recording these events? And even if none of the people who make it into the local paper are ever famous anywhere but on those pages, the local paper has immortalized them into Georgia's history.

There will always be tension between newspapers and government. Newspapers take their "watchdog" role seriously, and we should be grateful they do. At government meetings, often the only

person in attendance is the local reporter. That one person has to tell thousands of other people in the community what their government is doing. It's not an easy job, but it's an important one.

Sometimes, the paper may get the story wrong. Sometimes, government officials are going to do something they shouldn't and the paper is going to call them on it. Sometimes, both sides may have to agree to disagree on what is right for a community.

The Blackshear Times has a great tag line: "Liked by Many, Cussed by Some, Read by Them All." You may cuss your local paper from time to time – I know city officials have on occasion – but be grateful for the work they do and the impact it has on your city and the economy.

Based in Atlanta, GMA is a voluntary, non-profit organization that provides legislative advocacy, educational, employee benefit and technical assistance services to its 515 member cities.