



Community Newsroom Success Strategies

HOW TO MAKE PUBLIC AFFAIRS COVERAGE RELEVANT AND TIMELY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2-7: Elements of coverage

- **Orient everyone on the issues: Prepping, writing the story**
- **Deliver meaningful meeting coverage, follow-up**
- **Use editorial voice: Guiding principles**

8-11: Editorials/columns: Assert role as government watchdog

12: Beyond editorial: Develop relationships

13-17: Explain yourself

18: About Jim Pumarlo

Wyoming Press Association Virtual Convention
Jan. 15, 2021
Webinar



Jim Pumarlo
Newspaper Consultant – jim@pumarlo.com, (651) 380-4295
Community Newsroom Success Strategies – www.pumarlo.com
1327 W. Sixth St.
Red Wing MN 55066

ORIENT EVERYONE ON THE ISSUES: YOURSELF AND YOUR READERS – AND YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Premise: Educate the citizenry, and the elected officials, thus generating as much community participation as possible into decisions that affect residents' everyday lives.

Parameters

Prep for the story:

Introduce yourself to your beat, continue the discussion. When's the last time you called someone just to check in or had casual discussion over a cup of coffee?

Do your research. Become familiar with where to find background on community issues. Scan the last three months of the newspaper and identify the people, places and subjects at the forefront of community attention.

Tour the town. Names and places are at the heart of all stories. See the subjects of your stories firsthand.

Review committee action. The real decisions in public policy are often made in committee deliberations. Research agendas and determine if meetings warrant your attendance. At minimum, review the minutes or meet with the person who staffs the meeting.

Seek other community voices. Governing bodies make the decisions, but the policies affect the entire community. Touch bases regularly with other key individuals – United Way, business community, labor leaders, civic groups and volunteer leaders. Don't forget the five Bs - bars, beauticians, barbers, butchers and bakeries.

Convene a Readers Board. Identify avenues to get a pulse on the community or to get a different perspective on issues before governing bodies. The greater the number of perspectives you receive, the richer your coverage.

Read the entire newspaper. Reporters can easily fall into the trap believing that the world revolves around their particular beats. Content will be stronger and more relevant if reporters understand – and explain to readers – the interrelationship of all actions and activities in a community. Connecting the dots on budgets and taxes are great examples.

Consult newspaper family. Too many newsrooms operate in a vacuum. First, it's important to understand overall newspaper operations – from advertising deadlines to distribution. Second, the newspaper family also is often an excellent cross-section of a community. Employees can be a rich source of ideas and background information for stories.

Know your competition. Become familiar with local and regional newspapers, radio and television outlets. Pay attention to local bloggers and other social media networks. Monitor these reports regularly.

Write the story:

Prepare an advance. Review and research agenda, then write an advance. Maintain a schedule. Get copies of agenda and accompanying materials as early as possible. You're entitled to same information that elected officials receive.

Get names (proper spellings), titles and contact information for everyone on the agenda. Have a standing file for all elected and key appointed officials.

Pay attention to committees. Be sure you receive all minutes. Cover meetings when warranted; in many instances, committee discussions and votes are more important than the final vote by the decision-making body.

Use the editorial page. Expands the exchange of ideas and supplements your newsroom resources. Invite and highlight point/counterpoint commentaries; solicit letters to the editor on important issues.

Identify elected officials. List elected officials, as well as key appointed officials, on a regular basis. Include with coverage, when appropriate, especially in conjunction with calls to action.

Preview important votes. Interviews with the coaches and advances are standard procedure for sporting events. Why not give similar treatment to key votes? Poll elected officials in advance.

Profile key players. Feature key newsmakers in personality profiles and seek those who do not regularly receive the headlines.

Be proactive. Pursue the story when it is news. Don't wait to be spoon feed by the governing bodies, allowing them to release the story on their terms. Be the source for information.

Publish government calendar. Consider a government calendar of events that lists key agenda items.

Identify web links. Draw attention to other credible sources of information when appropriate. Check them out first.

DELIVER MEANINGFUL MEETING COVERAGE, FOLLOW-UP

Premise

Reporting the votes and actions of governmental bodies is simply the first step. Remember, every action prompts a reaction. The most substantive stories are those that interpret for readers the practical impact of policy-making decisions.

Parameters

Avoid chronological reports. The first item on the agenda rarely is the most important, if it's even worth a mention. Don't feel obligated to report each and every item.

Announcing that a group met is not a lead. The lead must summarize the most newsworthy aspect of what happened at the meeting.

Identify the news. Write the headline and summary paragraph. It will help focus your writing and help the editors. If you don't know where you're going with the story, your readers will be lost as well.

Put items in descriptive terms. Brighten your writing by making it understandable to readers. For example: "The city is looking to develop a three-acre parcel of land" or "The city is looking to develop a parcel of land about the size of three football fields."

Help readers readily understand the impact of decisions. Reports are typically filled with numbers, and percentages can be meaningless. For example, 5-percent increase in garbage fees is better reported as dollar impact on households, retailer, manufacturer.

Include voices of those affected. Deadlines might dictate reporting only a governing body's action. Depending on the detail of advance coverage, provide follow-up stories on the impact of decisions. How will families be affected by higher extracurricular school fees? What's the impact of an ordinance to eliminate all neon lights on storefronts?

Pay attention to presentation. Review agenda in advance to prepare graphics and photos. Break up coverage into stories and briefs; be aware of too many bulleted items. Place priority on meaningful headlines and crisp leads.

Use the web. Web is useful on two fronts. It allows for immediate reports and places nondaily media on equal footing with daily competition. It has no space constraints and therefore allows for publication of variety of reports, speeches and detailed statistics.

Track the issue: Prepare a summary paragraph of the issue that can be inserted in all stories. Track key dates and votes on the issue so information is readily available for background for you and other reporters in ongoing stories.

Continuing coverage. Beat should include regular contact with appropriate officials.



Don't write in a vacuum: Many government actions have a cumulative effect on readers, especially budget decisions.

Write for the readers, not the source: Summarize the discussion and use representative quotes.

Get both sides of story: Seek fair and responsible coverage if charges are leveled and no one is there to respond.

Get to the meeting early and survey the audience – noting number in attendance, demographics (young vs. old, men vs. women), whether they are there for primarily one agenda item, etc.

Be aware if individuals leave the meeting who you intend to quote or talk to; make contact with them before they leave.

Understand the terminology. If you don't, neither will your readers.

Put the meeting into context. Is a vote a final action or a recommendation? What are the next steps?



IF YOU REPORT A MEETING AS IF RECORDING THE OFFICIAL MINUTES, THE STORIES WILL GO UNREAD

Here's one example of how to drive readers away. This report of a City Council meeting presumably appeared on the front page. It began:

“Following the 4:30 p.m. meeting of the Committee of the Whole, the City Council met Monday night at 5:30 p.m. at City Hall. With no public hearings, bids, petitions, or open forum scheduled for the evening, the council quickly moved through the initial items.

“The following consent agenda items were approved by the council:

“Motion approving the minutes from the April 3, 2017 Council and Committee of the Whole meetings.

“Motion approving licenses.

“Resolution amending the 2017 fee schedule to include refuse container sanitizing charges.

“Resolution closing out debt service and capital project funds and transferring the balances.

“Resolution declaring items as surplus property and authorizing their disposal.

“After passing the consent agenda and a brief overview of two, updated city ordinances, the next resolution was for the council to voice their support to the state legislature to increase the budget for the Local Government Aid (LGA) grant program.”

USE EDITORIAL PAGE: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Premise

Local commentary can play an integral role in the reporting, interpretation and advocacy of local public affairs.

Parameters

Localize editorials just as you localize news stories.

Editorials should not be positioned as the right opinion or the only opinion. Editorials, at their best, should present a reasoned and well-researched position.

Newspapers should willingly and readily accept – publish – rebuttals. Point/counterpoint is at the heart of a dynamic editorial page. When you publish letters critical of an editorial, avoid having the final say by tacking on an “editor’s note.”

Editorials should be unwavering in sticking to and promoting a common theme. At the same time, be open to revisiting a stance if warranted by new information or changing circumstances.

Don’t hesitate to write complimentary editorials. You don’t always have to solve the problems of the world.

Editorials are strongest when they can offer direction on an issue.

It’s OK to educate, or break news, in an editorial, as long as it is a coordinated effort between news and editorial writers.

Be aware of the balancing act when the same people are writing the news stories and editorials.

Editorials should state any conflicts of interest by the newspaper or its staff.

Editorial: Panel snubs spirit of law

Red Wing Republican Eagle

Common-sense interpretation of the state's open meeting law says the Airport Board committee's recommendation for a caretaker contract should be public.

The vote should be revealed in the spirit of the law, too, as aptly underscored by Council member John Key at Monday's City Council meeting.

Three local vendors bid for the business. Longtime caretaker Seifert Skyways was challenged by Red Wing Aeroplane Co. and Blue Airways. The difference between the high bid of Seifert and the low bid of Blue was \$20,000 annually – or \$100,000 for the five-year contract, which also is eligible for a five-year renewal.

The committee's recommendation to go with the costliest bid begged the unmistakable questions: Why would four of the seven committee members recommend a contract where the city was guaranteed a net loss of \$18,000 each year? Why reject a proposal that would give the city \$2,000 a year in guaranteed revenue? Key was not alone in his surprise over the committee recommendation, especially considering that City Engineer Tom Drake said any of the vendors could fulfill the responsibilities. And Key stated the obvious: that it would be useful to know how the committee members lined up on the 4-3 vote to find out their rationale.

How council members formed their votes was especially interesting in the case of Dean Hove. A year ago he campaigned for office on the theme that the city must change the way it spends money and shop around for the best prices. Yet he supported the highest bid at the committee vote. He did switch his vote at the council table, though.

Council members, after rejecting the recommendation to keep Seifert Skyways, faced the task of hiring a new caretaker. Drake encouraged the council to make a decision Monday night.

"All the parties deserve an answer," he said.

The same parties – especially the taxpayers – deserved to know up front which committee members supported which vendor and for what reason.

The committee votes eventually were revealed, but no information was volunteered by city staff. The votes surfaced only after the issue was raised by this newspaper.



Editorial: County Board snubs Grosso

Red Wing Republican Eagle

Goodhue County commissioners owe a public explanation for why Roseanne Grosso of Red Wing was bypassed for the No. 2 leadership post at the board's reorganizational meeting this week. Their collective silence at the meeting spoke volumes.

For the record, we don't much care for the County Board's rotation of board leadership. It's been the practice that each commissioner gets his or her turn in leadership, thereby ensuring that each respective constituency has the ear of the chairman. Commissioners usually get named as vice chairman with the expectation that the chairmanship follows.

The protocol really doesn't take into consideration the factors that should go into selecting a chairman. Does the person have a vision for the board? Can the person effectively run a meeting? Is the person able to build coalitions? Does the person understand the role as a policy-making body without interference in daily operations, which are appropriately handled by staff?

Despite our dissatisfaction with the process, commissioners have followed the etiquette for years – until Tuesday. Richard Samuelson ascended to the chairmanship, but Grosso was bypassed for vice chairman. Bob Noah of Kenyon got that post.

The rotation is not sacrosanct. It has been changed if the commissioner seat in line for No. 2 is newly elected, which makes sense. For example, it would have been shortsighted to appoint newly elected Commissioner Ted Seifert as vice chairman. He needs more time on the job. Since Grosso and Seifert are the two commissioners representing Greater Red Wing, this area may be losing its turn in the leadership spot for several years.

But those circumstances have no bearing on what transpired this week. Grosso is not a new commissioner, and there's no clear reason she should not be vice chairwoman.

There are plenty of underlying reasons she likely was dodged, however, Grosso often has sparred with 2002 Chairman Jim Bryant and other commissioners, and appropriately so in some cases to their chagrin. She has challenged county administration, too.

We've had our differences of opinion with Grosso as well on some issues, but that is no reason suddenly to abandon the leadership transition on the County Board.

It's time for commissioners to adhere to the advice of their facilitator at Wednesday's workshop: Put egos aside and focus on the work at hand. Debate the issues with respect and then move forward in unity. Creating divisions as commissioners did Tuesday only makes the business of running the county more difficult.



Column: What's the city trying to hide?

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

Imagine a new era of nonaccountability in Red Wing government.

The Planning Commission recommends City Council denial of a contentious Briarwood housing project.

The Port Authority recommends City Council approval of the controversial tax-increment financing as part of the developer's agreement for a Target store.

An Airport Board committee – which includes three of the seven council members, three of the five Airport Board members and a Port Authority commissioner – recommends the city keep its existing airport caretaker but lose money doing so.

And all the recommendations are advanced following unsigned, secret ballots. It's not possible to match committee members – some elected, some appointed – with their votes. There's no ability to ask them to defend or explain their stances.

Far-fetched scenarios? Not if residents accept the legal advice of City Attorney Jay Squires.

Advisory bodies

Squires affirmed the 4-3 secret vote on an airport caretaker a week ago when he defended the practice Monday night at the City Council meeting.

Minnesota law states that all meetings of the City Council and its commissions, boards and committees are subject to the open meeting law. Paper ballots are permitted, but the votes must be revealed.

Squires claims that advisory, nongoverning bodies are not subject to the law. We don't necessarily agree.

And we have a stronger disagreement with his interpretation that the airport committee was strictly advisory. The fact that the group took a second public vote tells us they knew they had to go on the record.

The city attorney's liberal definition of an advisory body is ludicrous. Under Squire's rationale, all seven City Council members could meet as a Committee of the Whole and take secret votes. Why? Because their actions would be advisory only, subject to a vote for the seven reconvening as a formal council.

Disconcerting charades

The charades orchestrated by City Engineer Tom Drake, who is city staff liaison to the Airport Board, are disconcerting to anyone who cares about open government. The fact that his actions were supported by Squires is outrageous.

Residents must understand Drake's attempt to keep the vote secret to appreciate the seriousness of the matter.

The committee took a secret vote eight days ago, as requested by Airport Board Chairman Ron Bartels, due to the "sensitivity" of the issue. Drake not only allowed the unsigned vote, but then tried to downplay its significance.



At Monday night's council meeting, Drake said the vote that really mattered was when the committee – on a 6-1 public, voice vote – recommended the contract to the vendor who had been supported in the secret ballot. Council President Steve Castner dissented on that vote.

Vote that counted

If the 6-1 vote was the decisive action, then we all must ask why the council discussion focused solely around the 4-3 ballot:

- Why did Council member John Key ask the three council members to say how they voted on the 4-3 ballot?
- Why did Council member Joe Krueger explain his vote on the 4-3 ballot and not the 6-1 voice vote?
- Why did Drake, following the committee's 4-3 vote last week, ask R-E reporter Michael Fielding to report the ballot simply as a "close" vote?

Because, as they and everyone else knows, the decisive vote – the one that determined who the committee would recommend for airport caretaker – was the secret vote.

Mum on suspension

The airport vote was the second attempt in two weeks to keep things hush at City Hall.

In late September, Scott Nelson, deputy director of the fire department, was suspended without pay for two weeks. The R-E reported the action almost a week after Nelson was given notice of the discipline.

Why? Nelson feared any public announcement of the suspension would be an embarrassment. City administration said it would be uncomfortable for them to report the issue to the press.

We found out through other avenues and reported it. Discipline of public employees is public under state law – and it's also news.

Lawyer's advice

The only thing more exasperating than city staff interpreting the law themselves is getting the kind of advice they are receiving from their lawyers.

Last week a representative of the city's law firm – Ratwik, Roszak & Maloney in Minneapolis – was reviewing sections of the Minnesota Government Practices Act which conflict with a new federal privacy law governing health-care data.

The attorney said the position of his firm is that anything not spelled out in the Data Practices Act is private data.

That ought to be news to legislators who crafted the law. In fact, the law states that all government data is public unless otherwise specified.

The press and the government often get characterized in an adversarial "us" vs. "them" role. It's easy to see why.

The R-E takes seriously its role as a government watchdog. We'll continue to press for the information which we believe citizens have a right to know.

BEYOND EDITORIAL: DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS

Plan the page

Devote as much attention to the editorial page as you do to ongoing news coverage. Instill an editorial mind-set. Pay attention to your newspaper and your website.

Develop Kitchen Cabinet of advisers

Regularly touch base with individuals well connected with the community and issues. Think beyond elected officials. This will help build self-confidence in writing editorials.

Create editorial board

Go beyond the newsroom, and go beyond the newspaper.

Solicit contributions

Issue “call to action” for letters on specific subjects. Seek point/counterpoint commentaries.

Develop citizen columnists

Emphasize local connection. Rotate columnists. Don’t be afraid to reject a submission.

Ensure letters to the editor are substantive

The letters column should not routinely be used for news stories or thank-yous.

Scrutinize columns from elected officials, government agencies

These individuals and agencies receive plenty of attention through regular coverage. Be sparing in their use.

Identify potential columns from readers not regularly represented

Certain constituencies might warrant a regular presence on the editorial page. Make sure these contributions are meaningful and substantive. Don’t let page become a free-for-all for civic clubs.

Supplement – but don’t substitute – news coverage

Items such as points/counterpoints can be an excellent opportunity to supplement coverage when resources are limited. But this should not be a substitute for staff coverage.

Explain newspaper policies/decisions

Editor/publisher should regularly address issues raised by readers or anticipated issues.

Present variety of ideas

Pay attention to opinions contrary to standard editorial positions.

Use the web

Blogs – staff and citizen – are a vital element as exchange is timely and immediate. Develop timely, online polls, and focus on local issues whenever possible.



Column: There's reason we personalize budget cuts

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

A reader took the R-E to task for the article Tuesday that identified the six city employees whose jobs are on the list of potential cuts as part of the 2004 budget reductions.

The call came to People's Platform: "Now that the R-E has listed the names and wages, plus benefits, of positions being eliminated by the city, we would like a list of management and supervisory positions, their names and wages, plus benefits."

The reader raises two points: Why name the individuals who hold the affected jobs? What are the wages of city supervisors?

To answer the second question first, the R-E will not be publishing names and wages of supervisors at this juncture. Their jobs are not the subject of current budget discussions.

That does not mean we take lightly our decision to print the names of those individuals whose jobs might well be eliminated. We are sensitive to their emotions, especially those who have provided longtime, dedicated service to the city.

But there are some underlying reasons we chose to identify the employees as well as their positions.

As a practical matter, word travels quickly throughout a community. In addition, naming the individuals personalizes the story. The budget cuts are not about some faceless people who are little more than employee numbers in a sprawling bureaucracy. These individuals come in contact with hundreds of people during the course of their duties.

The R-E followed a similar practice when the School Board announced its preliminary layoffs for the 2003-04 school year. Some staff members were called back in later weeks, and those actions were reported, too.

We recognize that not all of the identified individuals will necessarily be laid off. Some may be eligible for retirement; others, due to seniority, may well find other positions in City Hall and subsequently bump somebody else out of a job. We'll follow the process as the City Council works through the 2004 budget.

The underlying factor, however, is that the newspaper has a responsibility to provide as much detail as possible on a topic as important as budget deliberations. Residents want to know the impact of the proposals – on their pocketbooks, and on their friends and neighbors.



Column: Dos and don'ts for public officials

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

In Minnesota, elected and appointed officials live in a fishbowl. Translated, nearly all of their actions are subject to public scrutiny.

To paraphrase the advice of Scott T. Anderson and Jay T. Squires: If something doesn't feel right – if there's hesitancy that a discussion among elected officials at an informal gathering instead should be done around the table in formal session – don't do it. Otherwise, it might be a violation of the state's Open Meeting Law.

It's no surprise that the R-E endorses the counsel. More surprisingly, however, is the fact that Anderson and Squires often find themselves as adversaries to the press, arguing why it's appropriate for public bodies to conduct certain business behind closed doors.

Anderson and Squires are both with Ratwik, Roszak & Maloney in Minneapolis, the law firm recently named to represent the city of Red Wing. Last week, Anderson and Squires conducted an orientation for members of boards and commissions. The topics were public meeting procedures, liability exposure for elected and appointed officers, the Open Meeting Law, and ethics in government and the Minnesota gift law.

Discussion on the Open Meeting Law caught our attention in particular, and so we attended the orientation. We found ourselves nodding in agreement for the lion's share of the counsel. Certain aspects of the law prompt the most questions, and this session was no different. Some points made by the legal counsel are worth repeating:

- All meetings are presumed open unless exceptions are provided in the law.
- The law applies to all meetings of the governing body and, in general, meetings of its commissions, boards, committees and subcommittees.
- A meeting, for purposes of the law, is defined as a "gathering of a quorum or more members of the governing body ... at which members discuss, decide or receive information as a group on issues relating to the official business of that governing body."
- "Chance social meetings," even though a quorum of the public body is present, are not covered by the law. But the social gathering cannot be used for the purposes of conducting official business unless notice requirements of the law are satisfied.

Not all distinctions are as clear cut when discussing the Open Meeting Law. An area that we remain vigilant with all public bodies is the citing of "attorney-client privilege" and "threatened litigation" to go into closed session. The different exceptions were written into law for very specific purposes, but some public bodies have taken more and more latitude in citing these as reasons for cause to close a meeting.

A Supreme Court decision is expected soon on the attorney-client exception involving a closed meeting by the Prior Lake City Council which was contested by the Prior Lake American newspaper. The ruling promises to give further definition to the privilege.

Too often public bodies attempt to close meetings to be "safe" or because they "think" it's the right thing to do. That doesn't pass legal muster.

We're not so naive to believe that we'll align every time with Anderson and Squires when it comes to interpretation of the Open Meeting Law and the Data Practices Act. But it's helpful when both sides argue their cases from a common understanding of the law.



Column: Communicating with citizens a shared responsibility

Red Wing Republican Eagle

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

Goodhue County commissioners are under criticism for their consideration of making the county auditor-treasurer and recorder appointed positions rather than elected positions.

Citizens say they are not necessarily opposed to making the change, but they are upset over the process. The idea ironically was first raised on Election Day – Nov. 7, 2000 – when commissioners reviewed their agenda for the 2001 Legislature with their lobbyist.

The R-E's government calendar published the Saturday before the meeting listed the legislative review, but our follow-up report did not detail any specific initiatives. That most likely was a combination of factors. The discussion was more of a brainstorming session. Also, any news from the County Board that day was secondary to the broad-ranging election coverage in the Nov. 8 edition.

But how the County Board got to where it is today – public hearings were conducted last month and the board is scheduled to make a decision Tuesday – should give everyone pause regarding the importance of tracking government deliberations.

Keeping informed about government is a shared responsibility among government officials, the press and citizens.

Government watchdog

The R-E takes seriously its role as a watchdog of government and devotes significant resources to tracking issues that can have significant impact on residents. The Legislature poses a challenge, given the number of bills introduced and the often meandering path they take before becoming law.

We do, however, try to pay special attention to "local bills": i.e. the legislation to give the County Board the authority to appoint the two posts. In hindsight, that did not occur with this piece of legislation.

In this case, the bill advanced quietly through the House and Senate with no one drawing attention to it. Local legislators did not issue press releases on the measure, and its progress was not discussed at County Board meetings.

The first mention of the Aug. 21 deadline for commissioners to approve or reject the measure came about a month ago with a front-page story announcing the public hearings in Red Wing and Zumbrota.

Redoubling our efforts

The process of how the proposal got to its present stage will prompt our news department to review how we track issues locally and at the Capitol and redouble our efforts. The situation underscores our role as the eyes and ears of the people. The reason the press pushes vigorously for open records and access to government is that it is impossible for citizens – individually or collectively – to track each and every action of government.

The current debate also offers a lesson for all governmental bodies. In this case, commissioners have a responsibility: If they are lobbying for change, they should make their intentions clear to constituents. That's especially important in this instance where they are poised to change the auditor-treasurer and recorder from elected to appointed positions. Nowhere in the official minutes for 2000 is the issue mentioned.



It's increasingly disturbing the amount of money spent by government to lobby another level of government. Invariably, it is a local unit seeking change at the Legislature. Officials are in far better position if they err on the side of giving out too much information rather than not enough.

Column: Look for regular updates from Supt. Kelly Smith *Red Wing Republican Eagle*

By Jim Pumarlo
Editor

What's the impact of this year's legislative budget-balancing bill on Red Wing Schools?

Is the Profile of Learning having the desired results?

Is there any easy answer to financing of schools in light of declining enrollments?

These are among the myriad issues facing public schools, and they all will provide fodder for a new column on this page. Red Wing Supt. Kelly Smith will write a monthly article that will make its debut next week.

The need for better communication among the schools and their many constituencies has been underscored several times in recent years. It was identified once again in the district's recently completed strategic planning and the Community Conversations projects sponsored last month by the Duff Endowment Fund.

The recurring message prompted Smith to approach the R-E with the idea of a regular report by the superintendent.

Ground rules

The column is accompanied by ground rules:

- The column will be an avenue to elaborate on issues facing the district. It will not be a stage to respond to comments expressed through editorials, letters to the editor or People's Platform. Those replies will be via letters to the editor.
- The column will be a voice for the superintendent. School Board members, if they wish to comment on subjects, have the standard avenues available to other readers.
- The column will be subject to the same review and editing as all other articles offered for publication. That does not mean censorship. Smith has free reign to express his opinions, even if they are contrary to ideas advanced by this newspaper.
- The column will not be a substitute for press releases from the district. For example, it's fine if Smith wishes to expand on the district's position on busing. But his first public statements on the issue appropriately belong in a news story.
- The column will not be a tool to give schools "good PR." If school personnel have an idea for a story, they always are welcome to contact our news department. The ideas for school articles – all articles for that matter – are judged on individual merits.

Community discussion

The bottom line, however, is that we believe the column will be a solid addition to this page and to discussion of issues vital to the community. The R-E places great emphasis on coverage of education, but we are limited in space and resources to publish everything that might be discussed at a meeting or submitted to us. And, in some cases, a subject might warrant additional explanation.

Smith will have the opportunity to pursue those things and more in his column. Look for the first one Tuesday.

JIM PUMARLO

Community newspapers, at their best, are stewards of their communities. The news columns are a blend of stories that people like to read and stories they should read. The advertising columns promote and grow local commerce. And the editorial pages are a marketplace of ideas.

Jim Pumarlo understands that energized newspapers are at the foundation of energized communities. His message is straightforward: Community newspapers – whether delivering information in the print or on the web – must focus on local news if they are to remain relevant to their readers and advertisers.

His seminars and training workshops are practical and interactive, including handouts that participants can use to tailor policies and procedures to their operations. In addition to his standard menu of seminars, he works with newspapers to provide custom training for their needs, including individual writing critiques.

He released a book in 2005, “Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper.” His second book, Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Campaign Coverage,” was released in 2007. His third book, “Journalism Primer: A Guide to Community News Coverage for Beginning and Veteran Journalists,” was released in 2011.

He is involved in the Minnesota Newspaper Association as a member of its Journalism Education and Legislative committees. He is a former member of the Minnesota News Media Institute, the training arm of the Minnesota Newspaper Association. He served on the hearing panel for the Minnesota News Council, which promoted fair, vigorous and trusted journalism by engaging the news media and the public in examining standards of fairness.



Jim Pumarlo
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/pumarlo/>
Newspaper Consultant – jim@pumarlo.com, (651) 380-4295
Community Newsroom Success Strategies – www.pumarlo.com
1327 W. Sixth St.
Red Wing MN 55066