

No News?

by Glenn C. Koenig
webmaster at Town Wide Mall
April 2023

(Note: This document contains links to various web sites, which will only work if viewed in electronic form.)

Many local cities and towns in Massachusetts (and perhaps in other states) no longer have a good source of local news. Maynard is a good example. Here I take a look at what resources exist, what the current limitations are, and where we might go from here.

Newspaper:

The Beacon Villager ceased publishing a newspaper (an actual printed edition) back in May 2022. David Mark, a local historian, reported the details on his web site:

<http://www.maynardlifeoutdoors.com/2022/04/the-end-of-newspaper-maynard-ma.html>

So, I checked out the web site shown in his story:

<https://www.wickedlocal.com/beaconvillager/>

When I got there, all I saw was regional and national news stories; nothing specific to Maynard. There was a button to subscribe, but when I clicked on it, it was not clear what I was about to pay for, as the word "Maynard" was not mentioned anywhere. I didn't bother to call the 800 number because I hadn't had good luck with getting reliable information in the past that way.

Even when the newspaper was still being published, most of the content was regional, with very little specific to Maynard. So, I didn't expect that that would have improved, especially now that the printed edition has ceased.

There is also a weekly booklet known as the Action Unlimited, which covers multiple towns, grouped into 7 different editions, two to four towns to an edition, as listed in the black box shown on their classified advertising description page (scroll down to see it).

It is delivered to every address in Maynard through the mail, but sometimes people report to me that they don't receive them. It carries notices sent to it by non-profit groups and local government agencies, along with display and classified advertisements. It is not a newspaper, per se, but it does provide some useful information. In Maynard, it also carries a monthly insert for senior citizens, prepared by the Maynard Council on Aging. It survives financially as a printed publication by virtue that most of its content is advertising.

Broadcast Media:

Maynard has both a TV and a radio station, operated by [WAVM](#), originating at our high school:

<https://wavm.org/>

They broadcast on the radio, using a low power transmitter, at 91.7 FM, but only on weekdays, during afternoons and evenings.

In order to see WAVM's TV programming, you have to have a cable TV subscription or watch specific programs on their [YouTube channel](#):

<https://www.youtube.com/@WAVMproductions/videos>

There, you can find video recordings of recent meetings of the Maynard Select Board, the School Committee, and the Finance Committee, along with a few special events, diligently recorded by high school student volunteers (a big *Thank You* to all those who do this work!).

This is a valuable service, admittedly, but these meetings typically run from 1 1/2 to 3 or 4 or even 5 hours! Most voters in town who work or have a family to care don't have the time to watch that many hours of meetings on a regular basis. Judging from the view counts shown for each (on

YouTube), only a few dozen viewers manage to do so. (I don't have access to how many people watch these meetings, live, on cable TV.)

What's needed perhaps, in addition to this complete and thorough "gavel to gavel" coverage, is some kind of summary, where the issues discussed are reviewed in a more concise format. Long ago, the local newspaper used to perform this function, but in the past few years, the newspaper didn't even devote one full time reporter to Maynard; a single reporter was assigned to cover more than one town. So there was very little information available for citizens to be adequately prepared for voting.

Financial Support:

Newspapers, TV & radio news programs, and now podcasts and web sites ... these all require labor, money, and other resources. Historically, newspapers were partly funded by advertising placed in them by local and regional businesses. But over the past 20 years or so, our buying habits have shifted from local and regional to online shopping. Click on a product on your phone or computer screen and have it delivered to your doorstep the next day - that is pretty hard to resist! You can see the result of this in the form of empty storefronts in town, "dead" big box stores (such as K-Mart, in nearby Acton) and boarded up stores in nearby shopping malls. Even the revenue from "classified ads" - small blocks of text at the back of the newspaper, paid for by individuals or service professionals, declined. People began using web sites, such as Craigslist, and more recently social media, such as Facebook, to buy, sell, or just give away items.

As revenues for local businesses have declined, so have Newspapers' advertising budgets. Newspapers' ad revenues declined as a result, but they were reluctant to substantially increase newsstand prices or subscription rates for fear of losing circulation. And circulation is essential to promise enough readers for the advertisers who remain to make it worthwhile to continue to pay for ads. (If circulation declines too rapidly, the entire newspaper may collapse as a result.)

As a result, local newspapers have been in decline for the last few decades, the news in them has become more "watered down" or replaced entirely by

stories copied from regional or national news “feeds” (such as from USA Today, or the Associated Press, etc.).

So historically there has been a synergy between businesses, local media, and local government, each depending on the continued functioning of the other. Now that is changing, leaving the question open as to our path forward.

Social Media:

Some news is available on social media, such as Facebook, Next Door, and a few others. There is a loose collection of groups on Facebook pertaining to Maynard, for example. Discussions on Next Door center on a certain town or group of towns. Perhaps these help spread the word on local issues. But there are some serious drawbacks. For example, Facebook is a business - a “commercial oriented commons” if you will, so it has its own priorities, its pros and cons. For one thing, it is designed to keep people logged in and glued to their screens for hours at a time. It’s not for everybody, nor should it be.

Another problem is that it’s difficult to sort through the numerous posts by individuals when looking to zoom in on a particular issue in town. One can easily spend an hour or more searching. In general, the world wide is incredibly vast and not well designed for extremely local searching. Again, most social media sites are advertiser supported, so they draw ads from regional or national advertisers. The bias is then toward gathering as wide an audience as possible to view those ads. Therefore, extremely local groups with small numbers of members is contrary to their revenue model.

Government & institution web sites:

The Town of Maynard has its own web site, with a variety of pages to cover different departments and functions. There is a lot to see here, but it may take some time to get familiar with how things are classified (example: Public Works includes the water department, whereas in some larger towns, that is a separate department.)

As a government entity, town or city web sites cannot carry opinions or other political or advocacy items or materials which would conflict with their impartiality mandate. For example, they can post who is running for election by displaying a sample ballot with candidate names shown, but they cannot carry candidate position statements, debates, forums, or biographical information, or even give links to their web pages. The same holds true for positions on issues facing town government. Only meeting agenda, minutes, reports and other official records are typically allowed. The various “sides” of any discussion are left up to the voter to find elsewhere.

Some town web pages include links that “jump off” to other web sites. A warning box appears to notify the reader before going to the linked site. Examples include the Maynard Public School department, which has its own web site, and Discover Maynard, which is a community guide to businesses, restaurants, events and activities, sponsored in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Where We Stand; Where We're Going:

Where do we go from here? We have the opportunity to develop new ways to share information and news among people in town. It is unlikely that we can resurrect the media or business environment of the past. *The lifeblood of any democracy is the free flow of relevant information, along with a population that is ready and able to avail themselves of that information.*

So, what are good ways to do that now?

Highlights of public meetings (now covered in full by WAVM, as I mentioned above) could be presented in a written report or a 10 to 15 minute local TV program, although I’m not certain if that was ever done in town.

To write such news stories or create such a TV program would take someone in the role of reporter to sit through each entire meeting, take notes, read the documents presented, perhaps do some background research, and then write or produce the resulting coverage to be published. Even then, it’s not easy to summarize the content of a meeting, yet

adequately cover the issues well enough so that citizens can feel well enough informed to vote. It's tricky to find a good balance. In today's world, there is a push to get good information within just a few minutes or a quick glance, but many issues and topics just can't be adequately covered that way!

My web site, the Town Wide Mall, is my attempt to provide something more to add to the local conversation. I'm just one person who cares about community, and my time and energy are limited, but there are plenty of other people who care as much or more than I do. I invite others to join in on the conversation about local media and see what we can come up with.

Meanwhile, I'm compiling a list of community groups and non-profit organizations in Maynard (or serving Maynard from neighboring towns), which I will share on this web site with everyone, freely available (in the [Community Guide](#) section, currently being developed).

Many of these groups are taking on roles in our town that supplement what town government can do, given the limited resources available. It is my hope to support and help expand these groups, so that their contributions can enhance the vitality of the town for everyone who lives, works, or visits here.