

SUGGESTED LEAD-IN:

As many towns in western Kansas struggle against a steady population decline...so does one of the most visible institutions in those communities – the local newspaper. University of Kansas Journalism Professor David Guth has been conducting research in the region and takes a look at the challenges facing rural publishers...

NARRATOR:

There's no secret that the last decade has been a trying time in the newspaper business. According to the most recent *State of the News Media* report by the Pew Research Center...newspaper revenues and circulation have been in decline since 2006. For big city newspapers...the challenge has been a sluggish economy and Internet growth. The urban audience has lots of options. However...the story is different for small town rural papers. Doug Anstaett is the executive director of the Kansas Press Association. He says the challenge for rural papers isn't an increase in competition...it's the loss of population...

ANSTAETT:

“The thing that makes community newspapers prosper I think is lack of competition. But the flip side of that is that those communities have not only lost people, which means they lost subscribers, but they've lost advertisers.” (20 seconds)

NARRATOR:

The fact is that even in the best of times...running a small community newspaper is hard work. And these are not the best of times. Approximately one in every three U-S counties lost population since 2000. Some Kansas counties have been in steady decline since 1900. Many people believe that newspapers play an important role in survival of rural communities. One of those is Scott County Commissioner Gary Skibbe...

SKIBBE:

“If you don't have a newspaper, you are really a town on the decline. It may be just a weekly. But, nonetheless, it is a newspaper.” (8 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

Scott County is a good example of a western Kansas community moving aggressively to stabilize its population. In recent years...county voters have approved bond issues to renovate the courthouse and Scott City High School. They also approved bonds to build a new \$24 million hospital. County Commission Chairman James Minnix said these projects were not possible without public support...

MINNIX:

“The citizens voted on all of those projects because they were comfortable with what had recently happened. I think it is trust and understanding. The newspaper can be a vital component of that, in the transparency that everything we do here. The people on the street kind of understand what we did and why we did it.” (21 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Newspapers...especially those in rural communities play a couple of different roles. First, they serve as an impartial observer – a watchdog – on behalf of their readers. Editor Sharon Friedlander of the *Colby Free Press*...

FRIEDLANDER-WATCHDOG:

“We take all of that very, very seriously. Sometimes we don’t make friends. I get the county commissioners mad at me every now and then because of something we write, but I still get a hug. Someone has to be there and fulfill that need.” (16 seconds)

NARRATOR:

However...Friedlander says that her second equally important role is that of a community booster...

FRIEDLANDER-BOOSTER:

“We are right up there banging on the drum every chance we get for Colby. That’s also part of our role. We should be a cheerleader.” (10 seconds)

NARRATOR:

Those are commonly held opinions among rural editors in western Kansas. Deana Sattler is editor and publisher of the *Garden City Telegram*. She says that when her community succeeds...so does her paper. However...she has an advantage that most small town editors do not share. Sattler has approximately four-dozen

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full-time and part-time employees. Most rural papers function with just a handful. One such paper is just 36 miles up U-S 83...the *Scott City News*. Its editor and publisher is Rod Haxton. Sattler says she is amazed at the job Haxton does...

SETTLER ON HAXTON:

“I worry about Rod getting out of the business and whose going to be the next person to step in and take on that kind of work load. I mean, a weekly newspaper workload is incredible. We think we have it hard. They are doing everything. He’s covering their city council and walking down the street selling an ad, probably.” (15 seconds)

NARRATOR:

As for Rod Haxton...he loves his job and he loves Scott City. But he also wonders who will pick up the mantle when he retires...

HAXTON-FUTURE:

“I don’t know. You know, you kind of wonder if J-schools are turning out somebody who will want to come in and take on this kind of an operation. You know, you are somewhat isolated out her in western Kansas. You’ve got to love a community in order to be out here. But that’s true of a lot of things.” (16 seconds)

NARRATOR:

There are several initiatives aimed at stemming the region’s population decline. One is the state’s Rural Opportunity Zones program. It involves tax waivers and student loan repayments for those eligible. There’s also an effort underway at the School of Business at the University of Kansas. It’s RedTire program matches Kansas college students with rural business owners looking for a successor. As for newspapers...Garden City’s Deana Sattler says she still believes in their future...

SATTLER:

“And yet Warren Buffet has bought a fair amount of newspapers. He thinks he makes pretty good business decisions. That’s what I tell my critics who say ‘your business is dying.’ I say ‘Warren Buffet needs to sharpen up his toolkit because he seems to be investing in newspapers.’ And there’s a reason for that.” (13 seconds)

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NARRATOR:

To say rural newspapers in Kansas are dying is an overstatement...and an oversimplification. Many continue to thrive against the hard realities of life on the Southern High Plains. But for others...the clock continues to tick toward an uncertain future.

For Kansas Public Radio News...I'm David Guth