

SEPTEMBER 2022  
*Designed by Orville Parker III*



# NEW JERSEY'S CIVIC INFORMATION BILL

THE STORY OF THE CAMPAIGN TO  
TRANSFORM LOCAL MEDIA

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# The Civic Information Bill Story

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**Summer 2015:**

Free Press Action and a group of journalists, academics and funders begin brainstorming about ways to use proceeds from a national spectrum auction to fund noncommercial media in New Jersey and other states.

**Summer 2016:**

Free Press Action lays the groundwork for the Civic Info Bill campaign in New Jersey, and, with the input of allies, begins drafting an idea for what would become the Civic Information Consortium.

**November 2016:**

*The New York Times* publishes an Op-Ed by Christopher Daggett, publicly laying out for the first time the idea of creating a new public-funding infrastructure at the state level, funded by proceeds from the national spectrum auction.

**March 2017:**

The Civic Info Bill campaign begins by hosting events in communities across New Jersey and building grassroots support for legislation that would dedicate public funding to creating more informed and engaged communities.

**April 2017:**

New Jersey's participation in the national spectrum auction concludes, with the state receiving \$332 million for the sale of two of its public-television-station licenses. Free Press Action and allies testify before the legislative budget committees, urging lawmakers to invest the windfall in the creation of the Civic Information Consortium.

**June 2017:**

New Jersey Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg and Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald introduce the Civic Info Bill, which would create the consortium. This is followed by Free Press Action's first lobby day at the statehouse, where residents deliver a coalition letter signed by more than 60 state organizations and ask lawmakers to address the local-news crisis by passing the bill.

**July 2017:**

Gov. Chris Christie uses almost all of New Jersey's spectrum-auction proceeds to plug budget holes.

**Fall 2017:**

The Civic Info Bill campaign relaunches: Free Press Action hosts additional community forums and secures pledges from Sen. Weinberg and Asm. Greenwald to reintroduce the bill in the next legislative session.

**Spring 2018:**

Thousands of residents sign petitions, call lawmakers and visit legislative district offices urging the passage of the Civic Info Bill.

**June 2018:**

After another successful lobby day, the Senate Higher Education Committee holds the first hearing on the Civic Info Bill, with testimony from Free Press Action, journalists and university partners. The legislature passes the Civic Info Bill and includes \$5 million in funding for the initiative in the state budget.

**August 2018:**

Gov. Phil Murphy signs the Civic Info Bill into law, but says the \$5 million allocated to the consortium is no longer available.

**June 2019:**

With the consortium lying dormant for nearly a year, the legislature passes a state budget with up to \$2 million in funding for the new initiative to finally get off the ground.

**March 2020:**

The consortium board begins to launch, only to be halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A few weeks later, Gov. Murphy freezes funding for the consortium.

**September 2020:**

Gov. Murphy and the legislature agree on a state budget that includes \$500,000 in funding for the consortium.

**June 2021:**

After receiving more than 70 applications in its inaugural open call for projects, the consortium selects 14 initiatives focused on community-health information, government accountability and diversifying journalism's pipeline. Shortly thereafter, the legislature doubles its allocation to \$1 million.

**June 2022:**

Gov. Murphy signs the FY2023 budget, which includes \$3 million for the consortium, with \$1 million possibly available in additional funds.



New Jersey residents gather at the statehouse to lobby lawmakers in support of the Civic Info Bill campaign. *Photo credit: Timothy Karr*

## Executive Summary

Fostering informed and civically engaged communities depends on access to accurate, relevant, timely and trustworthy information. However, runaway media consolidation, new technologies and changing consumer habits have led to widespread job losses and newsroom closings. The local-news crisis has left communities across the country in the dark.

These challenging times for local news — accelerating due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis — have created opportunities for innovation around funding, sustainability and community engagement.

One bright spot has been the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium. On Aug. 24, 2018, New Jersey made history: Gov. Phil Murphy signed legislation creating the consortium, a landmark nonprofit with the mission of strengthening local-news coverage and boosting civic engagement in communities across the state.

**The legislation, which passed with strong bipartisan support, came as a direct result of the grassroots campaign led by Free Press Action, which brought together local organizers, universities, artists, students, media-makers and other stakeholders to mobilize thousands of people across the state.**

The campaign drew on years of community input that Free Press Action solicited from residents and community leaders throughout New Jersey.

This extended listening period built trust and underscored the need to ensure that any project the consortium funds will meet community needs. And it showed that people will take action to keep their communities informed — but only if you invest in them, listen to their concerns and demonstrate solidarity.

After a years-long campaign that led to the consortium's creation in 2018, Gov. Murphy allocated \$5 million for this first-of-its-kind initiative, but various budgetary concerns held up this funding. The consortium never received that initial appropriation, but was allocated \$2 million the following year. Those funds, too, were ultimately pulled due to pandemic-era state-spending freezes. In September 2020, more than two years after its founding, the consortium was allocated \$500,000 to begin its work. It received an additional \$1 million in funding from the state in June 2021, and a commitment of \$2 million from Gov. Phil Murphy in the FY2023 budget.

The consortium is a joint initiative of five of the state's leading public higher-education institutions: the College of New Jersey, Montclair State University, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rowan University and Rutgers University. The nonprofit, governed by an independent board, is investing public funds to support quality journalism, promising media startups and other efforts meant to better inform communities.

This case study explores the lessons learned and perspectives gained from key stakeholders involved in the Civic Information Bill's passage. The goal here is to tell the story of the campaign, with an eye to teasing out learnings that can be applied elsewhere.

The local-news crisis isn't unique to New Jersey: It's harming communities throughout the country. Media organizations, activists and others looking for ways to address the crisis in their own states can draw on the insights Free Press Action gained from its successful grassroots-organizing campaign, the messaging that resonated and the lobbying in the New Jersey statehouse.

## LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Focus on community need:** Public policy to support local news and information should focus on fulfilling a community's specific needs, not on saving news outlets or journalists' jobs. While the journalism industry is important, what's most crucial is the impact it has on the public and the democratic process. That was the key message that got everyday people engaged and willing to support the initiative. It also inspired lawmakers who care about civic participation and community health.
- **Policy is essential:** Public-interest policy must be part of any conversation about the future of journalism. Such conversations must be informed by grassroots efforts and the needs of impacted communities.
- **Get people motivated:** Be mindful that newsrooms and journalists are doing the best job they can under difficult circumstances and producing excellent work. Recognize that the need for better community information, and more of it — rather than present-day failures or losses — is what gets people motivated and involved.
- **Cast a wider focus:** News-and-information policy should encompass all types of journalism, media, storytellers and organizations that focus on meeting communities' information needs. Furthermore, community-information needs — not the needs of the journalism industry — should be paramount in any of these policies.
- **Build multi-stakeholder coalitions:** Getting people to fight for better local news takes involvement and support from like-minded civic organizations, academics, lobbyists, legislators and funders — not just journalists and others in the media industry. Those who are most impacted by local-news policy have to work together. Ensure that a diverse array of stakeholders — political appointees, academics, journalists and community members — are represented and have a voice at the table.
- **Organize the people:** Recognize that grassroots organizing and activating civic-minded groups are key to pressuring legislators to support this kind of initiative. And it takes participation and assistance from all over the target region to pull off this kind of campaign.

# The Civic Information Bill Story

The state of New Jersey, sandwiched between the New York and Philadelphia media markets, has had a rich history of local, community-focused media serving its 565 municipalities. But over the last decade, media consolidation, newsroom layoffs and the closing of news outlets have hit New Jersey especially hard, leaving many communities with news-and-information deficits.

“We recognized the problem around the lack of local news for a long time, but didn’t know how to address it,” said New Jersey League of Women Voters Executive Director Jesse Burns. “We’ve had to rely on hyperlocal news and citizen journalists where there’s no other coverage available. Relying on each of these outlets to get our message out works to a certain extent. You may have one community with a strong online presence, but a lot of communities where you don’t.”

For several years prior to the passage of the Civic Info Bill in 2018, several key players were working to address the dire lack of local and community news in the state, including the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation’s Informed Communities program and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University.

Thanks also to the efforts of the Dodge Foundation and the D.C.-based Democracy Fund, Free Press — the 501(c)(3) companion organization of Free Press Action — launched its News Voices project in 2015 in New Jersey to bring communities into the conversation around the future of local news. The group established a network of local allies and facilitated successful public-engagement forums around the state focused on connecting residents and reporters.

“We had been trying to address the local-journalism problem in New Jersey going all the way back to the mid-2000s,” said Free Press Action Co-CEO Craig Aaron. “We were trying to save funding for public media, focused on how to rebuild the system. Very early on, we tried to convince public media to get their constituents involved and think of them as more than donors. This is how we started to focus on what we saw as a need to organize for and around journalism.”

As the News Voices project worked to get more public input into efforts to reshape local news, a unique opportunity was brewing for New Jersey media. The Federal Communications Commission was laying the groundwork for a nationwide auction that would allow television broadcast-license holders (like local PBS stations) to sell their spots on the airwaves to free up more space for telecommunications providers.



The state was in a unique position. Other auction participants were entities like universities, independent nonprofits and local school boards. But in New Jersey, the state held the licenses — which happened to be some of the nation’s most valuable ones.

Elected officials would decide what to do with the money — creating an opening for the public to pressure them on how to spend the windfall. Never before had there been an opportunity like this, where a state was set to receive hundreds of millions of dollars or more from the sale of public media, and had the chance to invest it into something entirely new.

Those watching this potential windfall were dreaming about what New Jersey could do with it.

Free Press Action began speaking with Democracy Fund Voice and the Dodge Foundation in summer 2015 about how the spectrum proceeds could be used to reinvent public funding. At around the same time, in November 2015, longtime Philadelphia-based media consultant and former public-media executive Chris Satullo attended a Free Press event. He spoke with then-Dodge CEO Christopher Daggett about the idea of using the auction proceeds to strengthen New Jersey’s local-media ecosystem.

“I thought it was a great opportunity to create a new model for public media, a trust fund for public journalism,” said Satullo. “After spending eight years in public media, I was frantic about the way that public media was looking backward instead of forward to a digital future. Chris (Daggett) got excited and asked me to draw up a pitch for some of the spectrum money, the purpose of which would be to make New Jersey create digital public media for the 21st century.”

Daggett, who was party to conversations that Free Press Action was having with the Democracy Fund, pulled the two efforts together. He and the two groups began to work together on a rough vision of a civic-media fund’s mission. “We were interested in helping ensure that as much of these funds as possible were directed into supporting civic information,” said Tom Glaisyer, the managing director of the Democracy Fund’s public square program.

The partners fleshed out the idea for a civic-information fund in the late spring and early summer of 2016. Free Press Action began planning a statewide grassroots campaign to use the auction proceeds to better inform New Jersey communities.

“If there really was all this money out there that was coming into New Jersey, we could use that money to solve the significant problems with local journalism,” said Craig Aaron of Free Press Action. “We saw that there were all these dollars about to come into the system and nobody was talking about it, so we did.”

Free Press Action’s goal was to convince lawmakers to invest the auction proceeds — which at the time were speculated to be north of \$1 billion — in a fund that would support public-interest-driven news-and-information projects.



In November 2016, the Dodge Foundation’s Daggett worked with Free Press Action to pen a *New York Times* Op-Ed titled “An Auction That Could Transform Local Media.” In it, he called for the creation of “a permanent fund to support a new model for public-interest media, financed by a significant portion of any auction revenue. This approach could serve as a model for other states, universities, and communities seeking to sell their spectrum.”

In an interview for this case study, Daggett said, “When the FCC spectrum auction was announced, I and others felt that it would make the most sense to have auction proceeds used for a pool of funds that could be used as an endowment and drawn down at a rate of 5 percent per year in support of local news and information.”

In December 2016, Free Press Action’s Mike Rispoli, Chris Satullo (who had joined Free Press Action as a consultant) and Jon Whiten (the vice president of statewide organization New Jersey Policy Perspective) began reaching out to potential allies and politicians who could advocate for the initiative. Among the targets were gubernatorial candidates like Phil Murphy.

Feedback from Murphy’s campaign staff was positive, but the response from officials in Trenton was not.

At first, representatives of the Assembly Majority Office said the idea would never come to fruition. Many reasons were cited: the state's budget issues, the lack of public interest in policy solutions to the local-news crisis and the challenging process of shepherding model legislation through the statehouse. One lawmaker said at the time, "If my constituents don't care about it, why should I?"

To begin figuring out how this kind of fund would benefit local communities, Free Press Action convened a day-long meeting in December 2017 with representatives from the New Jersey, New York City and Philadelphia media markets. People from news outlets using a range of business models attended. Those present brainstormed about how a fund to strengthen local news could support innovative projects to better serve the people of New Jersey.

While people were enthusiastic about investing more money in community-based journalism, participants said they doubted such an effort would come to pass. And many attendees felt that New Jersey's government should play no role in funding journalists' work.

There was another big snag. The state of New Jersey, as the license holder, wouldn't learn how much money it was going to get until April — less than 90 days before the state budget was to be finalized.

Poor timing aside, the more pressing issue was that the state wasn't going to fund something that didn't yet exist. Legislative staffers warned that doing so was too risky.

That's when Free Press Action, in consultation with the Senate Majority Office, first floated the idea of partnering with public universities. As public institutions, they could accept and distribute money. Involving universities in the project would help the schools meet their academic missions and allow their government-affairs teams to support the campaign.

As Free Press Action's Craig Aaron recalled, "When we said that we wanted the legislature to throw all this money at this new thing, legislative staffers said that this would be a much easier sell with their colleagues and would be more accountable if the funding went through the existing financial channel between the state and the various public universities that teach journalism."

"We had to do university outreach and quickly get their buy-in," Aaron continued. In February 2017, Free Press Action rewrote the proposal to include the original partners — Montclair State University, the New Jersey Institute of Technology,

Rowan University and Rutgers University — public-research universities with robust journalism, media and technology programs. The proposal was shared with lawmakers just a few days before Gov. Chris Christie unveiled his proposed budget.



James L. Thompson, Free Press Action's lead New Jersey organizer, speaks with Newark residents during a community forum in October 2017. Photo credit: Timothy Karr

Determined to seize the moment, Free Press Action ramped up its network-building activities. The organization had recently hired James L. Thompson, an experienced New Jersey-based labor and housing organizer, as part of its statewide team. His job was to activate residents in areas that media consolidation had harmed, bring them up to speed on the consortium proposal and mobilize them into action.

“New Jersey suffers from being sandwiched between Philly and New York,” Thompson said. “In the area surrounding these more robust media markets, poor communities and communities of color suffer from a lack of journalism that speaks to their needs wherever and whoever they are.”

Free Press Action heard this sentiment over and over again in communities it organized in as part of its News Voices project. Because it had relationships with local groups, activists, students, journalists and other residents in various parts of New Jersey, the organization knew it had to mobilize people who felt dissatisfied with the current state of local news.

## Getting the Public's Buy-In

To Free Press Action, it was vital to engage the public early and often throughout this campaign.

The group learned through its organizing work that people cared deeply about the future of local news in their communities. They knew that the public's buy-in was key if they were going to ask people to take action to support the novel concept of the consortium. To move the bill in Trenton, Free Press Action focused on ways to relay stories from communities to lawmakers about how the loss of local media harmed residents and how the consortium could strengthen local news and information.

There were only a few months left to get support for the idea before lawmakers and the governor finalized the budget in July. The Free Press Action team decided to focus on organizing community forums in key lawmakers' districts and in districts where university partners were based.

In spring 2017, Free Press Action hosted seven forums in as many weeks across the state. The organization invited local residents and journalists who covered each area to discuss the state of local news, whether their needs were being met and how to get more people to support local journalism. Participants also shared their ideas for how public funding could be used to better inform their communities.

"We asked people what they wanted to do with this public money made available by the sale of assets that had been set aside for public information in the first place," said Satullo. "Should this money be used for other things, like to fix potholes, improve education and reduce taxes? The people at our forums said no, fix public media. The goal of the outreach was to see how our ideas would land in urban, suburban and rural areas alike. See what questions people asked. Then we'd ask the big question: 'If this thing happens, what would you like to see us do?' People understood that there had been a loss in local news and they were open to taking this money to improve local journalism."

"Initially we mentioned the spectrum auction and the opportunity it represented, but we took that out in later forum engagements," said Thompson. "Instead we just mentioned the opportunity in the most simple terms, and focused on people's information needs and how we could get other folks to demand and support better news and information. So, for example, we would ask:

# “If you had a million dollars to support local journalism in your community, what would you do? What would you fund?”

The ultimate goal was to get people engaged enough to participate, attend meetings and call on their state representatives to take action.

“Whenever we hosted meetings, we would ask people to take specific actions such as talking to friends and family, writing to local newspaper editors, signing petitions and attending lobby days in Trenton at the statehouse,” Thompson said. “Our efforts were initially focused on answering people’s questions and getting people involved.”

Thompson recalled that one woman who attended the campaign’s first forum in Camden in the spring of 2017 was so inspired that she reached out to her state legislator and scheduled a meeting in their office. The woman’s passion and energy motivated her lawmaker to co-sponsor the final bill.

Lisa Bonanno, a New Jersey-based political neophyte who became politically active following the 2016 presidential election, was that person. “I went to the forum and networked with cool people,” she said. “They wanted to know what information communities were looking for, and what communities need. The forum was in Camden, which has a high poverty rate. Many people don’t have a smartphone. There needs to be a newspaper presence there, but the majority of news is digital. I thought, that could be a problem.”

In each place, forum participants talked about what their information needs were, how existing media outlets weren’t meeting many of them, and shared ideas on how something like the Civic Info Consortium could benefit their communities.



During a March 2017 forum, Camden residents share their ideas on how public funding could lead to more informed communities. Photo credit: Timothy Karr



Some of the ideas residents had included municipal-website templates designed for easy navigation; media-literacy programs for students and adults; mini-grants for reporting projects; fellowship programs for young journalists serving overlooked communities; and local apps to provide mobile access to key government data, e.g., restaurant-inspection records, social-service contacts, environmental data, and roadwork and traffic data.

“Camden, Newark, every place has specific needs,” Bonanno said. “When they held a forum in Glassboro, in my community, the people there had very different needs. We had digital [news outlets] but not good coverage. The point was, Free Press Action went around and asked.”

But what legislators considered a good idea — the involvement of universities — didn’t go over well with the public during the community forums. “The whole idea of university involvement tested really badly with the public,” Satullo said. “What we thought originally was going to be a pure play got mixed in with the politics of the universities.”

Forum participants were concerned that the money would end up funding university research projects rather than projects that would benefit communities. In the end, Todd Wolfson at Rutgers University was credited with an approach that threaded the needle. He began talking about how this money could be a transformational incentive for universities to work directly with communities to solve issues, not just research them.

With no bill introduced, Free Press Action began to shift the conversation and argue that the information needs of residents were so crucial and unmet that using the spectrum proceeds was the right way to spend the windfall of cash. Some in the statehouse thought it was an interesting idea; others remained skeptical about the bill’s prospects. But the concept was gaining more traction because of the grassroots energy that was building. Free Press Action and its team of allies testified before the public Senate and Assembly budget hearings in March and April and highlighted communities’ support for the legislation.

Later in April, the state learned that the one-time cash infusion it would receive from the spectrum auction was \$332 million — a number far short of the near-billion dollars first speculated, but a large sum nevertheless. Once everyone knew the figure, it was much easier for Free Press Action to get buy-in from legislators, Satullo said.



## The Civic Info Bill Gains Momentum in the Statehouse

Two key lawmakers who supported the idea early on were Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg and Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald. Both lawmakers lived in areas affected by the state's local-news crisis — making them natural allies to the Civic Info Bill campaign.

Sen. Weinberg represented Bergen County, home to North Jersey Media Group, a newspaper chain Gannett had recently purchased. When Gannett took over the family-owned company, which operates the state's second-largest paper, *The Record*, it laid off hundreds of newsroom employees and shut down many local papers. And Asm. Greenwald represents Camden County in South Jersey, an area dominated by the Philadelphia media market, leaving many local communities lacking any significant coverage.

Greenwald was particularly receptive to the question “How can we help get your constituents more local community information?” In his first meeting with Free Press Action, Greenwald said that he wanted to be the prime sponsor of the bill. From there it was easier to get other lawmakers to sign on.

“We were also being contacted by newspaper operators and owners of the more independent, small papers around the state who wanted us to work with them to help keep news local,” said Greenwald.

After months of getting a great reception from communities — but lukewarm responses, at best, from Trenton — getting the support of the majority leaders was a big boost to the bill's chances.

That spring, Free Press Action hired Kay LiCausi of Hoboken Strategy Group as its government-affairs consultant. To move legislation, the organization needed someone with statehouse-lobbying experience and a firsthand perspective on New Jersey's unique political scene.

Taking all it had learned from both the initial community forums and stakeholder meetings with media representatives, nonprofit lawyers, researchers and lawmakers, Free Press Action worked with LiCausi to refine the bill. “We came up with the actual structure and policy for the initial fund concept,” Aaron said. “We figured out how it should work and we drew up draft legislation based on that initial concept.”

The organization laid out the framework and then invited its partners and stakeholders to sit at the table and fill in the gaps. At that point, the offices and staff

of Sen. Weinberg and Asm. Greenwald worked hands on with Free Press Action in drafting the legislation.

“Having two legislators in leadership behind this [was key],” said Shane Mitchell, Weinberg’s legislative director. “We knew that if we got it going the dividends we could give to the public would be immense. And we had faith in our public universities to help oversee this.”

On June 1, 2017, Sen. Weinberg and Asm. Greenwald introduced the Civic Info Bill. The introduction of the legislation was a pivotal moment, and also the start of the real work of getting the bill to move through the statehouse.

Soon after the bill’s introduction it picked up another 15 sponsors. Free Press Action also met with representatives from Gov. Chris Christie’s office, and, since it was an election year, with several gubernatorial candidates, including the staff of then-candidate and future Gov. Phil Murphy.

The organization also held two statehouse events, including a lobbying day where 20 people from various communities came to Trenton to ask lawmakers to support the bill.



Free Press Action’s James L. Thompson and Mike Rispoli (left) with a group of New Jersey residents at the Civic Info Bill Lobby Day at the New Jersey Statehouse in June 2017. *Photo credit: Timothy Karr*

During the lobby day, Free Press Action delivered a coalition letter that 60 organizations — primarily representatives of the state’s leading Hispanic civic and media organizations — signed in support of the Civic Info Bill. This was a crucial way to convey the campaign’s central theme:

**This wasn’t about saving journalism, but about better representing underserved communities in local news and ensuring people had the information they needed to stay civically engaged.**

Many of the new sponsors of the bill came from districts where Free Press Action had held community forums. Sponsors also included lawmakers who lobby-day participants had spoken to one on one. The grassroots pressure was proving to be effective: Residents could tell legislators how the loss of local news affected their communities — and how they were excited about the promise of the consortium.

“Free Press Action kept up the pressure externally, meeting with people all year round, making sure the issue didn’t die. It was the combination of those two that kept the bill moving forward,” said Mitchell.



Free Press Action allies join the Civic Info Bill Lobby Day at the New Jersey Statehouse in June 2017. Photo credit: Timothy Karr

Even with the momentum, Free Press Action knew that it was working within a tight timeframe: The budget needed to be passed by July 1. It was a short runway to get everything done and, in the end, the bill didn't move forward.

Then everything was taken out of play. Even though the state received \$332 million from the sale of its television licenses, nearly all of it was directed to the general fund to cover budget gaps, with only \$10 million deposited into the state's Public Broadcasting Authority. And just like that, the years of planning and campaigning were seemingly wiped out when this huge windfall vanished almost as quickly as it came in.

"Things were pretty dire, due to our governor at the time," said grassroots organizer Bonanno. "Something like this, Christie shot right down. He took almost all that auction money and stuck it in the black hole of the budget. I remember at the time thinking that he had destroyed us. This was right around the end of the fiscal year. But it wasn't over."

## Keeping Up the Pressure

Free Press Action was left asking: What now? The entire campaign was based on the assumption that the money for the consortium would come from this unique source. But that source wasn't there anymore.

"So of course Chris Christie took the lion's share of the FCC spectrum money to plug budget holes," said Mitchell. "Most of that money went poof. We couldn't get it done under Christie but we were committed to keeping up the fight."

In July 2017, Free Press Action was forced to make a key decision: Now that most of the auction money was unavailable, would the campaign continue?

The campaign had momentum: With a bill introduced, support from lawmakers and the buy-in of thousands of engaged and motivated residents, Free Press Action decided to continue pushing.

"We had enough sponsors and enough people willing to put their names on this and push this forward that even when we didn't get the initial money, we all believed that we should keep going," said Aaron.

Now Free Press Action had to show legislators that this issue was too important to overlook.

In the fall of 2017, the Free Press Action team decided to keep the campaign going, even if the bill was unlikely to move during the lame-duck session. “We had an unfavorable situation in the governor’s office,” said Aaron. “Chris Christie, the lame-duck governor, was unlikely to sign on to any new fund even if it did pass the state legislature.”

## **The strategy was three-fold:**

- 1) Keep the issue at the forefront with lawmakers**
- 2) Build more grassroots support**
- 3) Strategize how to gain the support of incoming Gov. Phil Murphy and a new legislature**

Free Press Action organizers met with Murphy’s staff to update them, get their input and gauge their interest. The staffers were as intrigued by the concept of the Civic Info Consortium as they had been during their previous meeting with Free Press Action in winter 2016.

To keep the idea in front of lawmakers, the team focused on driving phone calls to key committee members. Hundreds of New Jersey residents called their lawmakers; those who supported the bill said they would continue advocating for it during the new legislative session in 2018.



Bloomfield Information Project founder Simon Galperin (right) and a fellow New Jersey resident speak with state policymakers during the Civic Info Bill Lobby Day in June 2017. *Photo credit: Timothy Karr*

Free Press Action returned to its community-engagement playbook and scheduled the next round of public forums. The purpose was to motivate constituents to pressure lawmakers to reintroduce the bill.

The team had learned that holding events in carefully selected locations based on key target demographics — namely communities of color that were news deserts within key lawmaker districts — netted significant results in terms of both public engagement and impact with lawmakers. This second round of public meetings focused on determining what actions engaged residents would take.



Chris Satullo and Free Press Action speak with Newark residents about local-news coverage during an October 2018 community forum.  
*Photo credit: Timothy Karr*

The second round of forums culminated in participants sending letters to their state representatives, calling those same officials and showing up at town-hall meetings and other civic events. And Free Press Action’s team focused on energizing and activating all of the participants in the second round of events.

“Once we started our second round of meetings, we shifted away from forums to organizing drop-in visits to state legislators,” said Thompson, Free Press Action’s organizer. “It was successful because we were able to target key legislators such as the chair of the budget committee and really focus on getting the bill out of committee to a floor vote.”

The team discovered it needed to adjust messaging themes depending on which part of the state it was working in. In South Jersey, the most effective messaging focused on news deserts and the near-total lack of local coverage. In the northern part of the state, where a recent newspaper acquisition led to downsizing, layoffs and reduced local coverage, the most impactful messaging centered on how to fill the resulting news gaps.

“That was a perception people and particularly lawmakers had that this was about keeping professional journalists working,” said Thompson. “We had to keep on reinforcing that this was about keeping communities informed instead of trying to save journalism.”

“If you were fortunate enough to live in a place where there was local news, we were here to help make it better and stronger,” Thompson continued. “If you lived in a place where there wasn’t any local journalism, we wanted to start something that served your community’s needs. While keeping the pressure on legislators, the conversation moved away from discussing the merits of the concept to the practicality of getting the idea passed and funded.”

**The campaign coalesced  
around this message:**

**REVIVE. STRENGTHEN.  
*TRANSFORM*  
NEW JERSEY'S MEDIA**

**(THIS IS OUR CHANCE.)**

A photograph of a broken television set lying on its side in a field of dry, brown vegetation. The screen is cracked and tilted, but it displays a white sign with black text. The sign reads: "SUPPORT THE CIVIC INFO BILL S2317 / A3628". The background shows a clear sky and a distant horizon line.

**SUPPORT THE  
CIVIC INFO BILL  
S2317 / A3628**



## Legislators Revive the Civic Info Bill

Keeping the pressure on the sponsors to reintroduce the bill was essential. Thanks to the growing grassroots support, Sen. Weinberg and Asm. Greenwald agreed in December of 2017 to reintroduce the bill in the next legislative session.

In a statement, the majority leaders said:

“People across New Jersey this past year have made their voices heard: Something must be done to strengthen news at the local level, especially in low-income communities and communities of color, and we need to be investing in innovative business models and technologies aimed at keeping people informed.”

It was a big moment. The reintroduction of the Civic Info Bill signaled that Free Press Action had cultivated an influential constituency that would advocate for better news and information in their communities.

Free Press Action testified again before the budget committees of both the New Jersey Senate and Assembly. The team also organized university leaders, journalists and community members to testify before these committees.

And Thompson worked with residents across the state to visit the offices of key lawmakers, including the Senate president and Assembly speaker.

These pivotal moments aside, there was little momentum around the legislation; it wasn't in budget discussions and it was stuck in committee. The public and legislators were showing interest, but the bill wasn't moving forward. Not even New Jersey-based news outlets were adequately covering the issue.

By May 2018, however, the new version of the Civic Info Bill got 20 co-sponsors, half of whom had met with constituents during the drop-in visits Thompson had organized. The most powerful thing the Free Press Action team had learned was that lawmakers needed to hear directly from their constituents and university representatives to get motivated.

“We brought the universities on to both support the formation of the consortium and to leverage their political contacts in Trenton,” said Aaron. “So the universities came through and wrote to their representatives, for which the Free Press Action folks will be eternally grateful as the universities had other business before the legislation that they also needed to get done. They didn't need to stick their necks out for this, but they did.”

## Crunch Time

By June 2018, Free Press Action was back to pushing the rock along. It was at this time that the budget picture started to get clearer.

By June 2018, the office drop-ins, petitions and phone calls were starting to have a cumulative effect. The team started getting more responses from lawmakers and securing key meetings with staffers across different offices in the legislature. The more Free Press Action pushed, the more that lawmakers heard from their constituents and took notice.

When it came to the actual process, lawmakers split the bill into two parts. The first bill focused on actually creating the Civic Information Consortium and its structure, as well as its relationship with the public universities. The second bill was a budget resolution to appropriate \$5 million to the consortium, or half of the remaining \$10 million from the spectrum auction that remained in state coffers. While it was far less than what Free Press Action had hoped for at the campaign's outset the year before, it was still a significant seed investment to get the new initiative off the ground.

With that plan in place, Free Press Action held another lobby day, bringing more than a dozen residents to the statehouse to directly ask lawmakers to support the Civic Info Bill. As a result, the bill picked up its first Republican sponsor, Sen. Robert Singer, who represented a district served by a Gannett paper that had experienced several cutbacks over the course of the previous decade.



Free Press Action's Mike Rispoli testifies before the New Jersey Senate Higher Education Committee in June 2018.

*Photo credit: Timothy Karr*

## The Final Push

And in what felt like an instant, the Civic Info Bill, which had lain dormant for months, began to move fast.

The Senate Higher Education Committee, the first stop for the bill given the universities' involvement, agreed to hold a hearing on the bill. On June 18, 2018, Free Press Action brought a cohort of people to testify on behalf of the consortium — Free Press Action's Mike Rispoli; Mary Mann, founder of the hyperlocal news outlet Village Green; Chenjerai Kumanyika, host of the award-winning podcast "Uncivil" and a professor at Rutgers University; and Sanford Tweedie, dean of the College of Communication and Creative Arts at Rowan University.

Each person brought a unique angle to appeal to lawmakers. Rispoli shared information about the grassroots campaign to advocate for the consortium; Mann talked about the need to support emerging hyperlocal news outlets; Kumanyika spoke about how the funding would serve the information needs and voices of communities of color; and Tweedie discussed the role that university partners like Rowan would play.

At that hearing, Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr. asked if the board overseeing the consortium could be made bipartisan to ensure that one political party wouldn't

dominate the body. Since Free Press Action didn't want the board to become politicized, it agreed.

The bill passed the Senate Higher Education Committee that same day, and the next day passed the Assembly Budget Committee. In a span of three weeks, the Civic Information Bill's prospects went from dim to a floor vote. Both the inside strategy and external pressure paid off when the bill passed the legislature with overwhelming bipartisan support — 18 months from the time of the campaign's launch.

Shortly after, the legislature passed the state budget, which included \$5 million in funding for the consortium. Gov. Murphy then signed the budget the following day. And with that, \$5 million in funding was allocated to this landmark initiative.

## ***A Historic Moment***

Rispoli celebrated this milestone in a statement marking the occasion:

“Today marks a historic victory for all people across New Jersey. Over the last 18 months, residents around the state spoke out in support of the Civic Info Bill. Thousands signed petitions, called their lawmakers, attended community forums and participated in lobby days at the statehouse. Their stories about how communities have suffered from years of media consolidation were the driving force to securing millions of dollars that will strengthen local news and information in towns and cities across New Jersey.

**Never before has a state taken the lead to address the growing crisis in local news.**

The passage of the Civic Info Bill, and the approval of funding for it, drew headlines across the United States and internationally. The *New York Times*, CNN, the *Guardian* and several leading media thinkers wrote and commented on the historic nature of the bill's passage.

## *News From Your Neighborhood, Brought to You by the State of New Jersey*

### New Jersey pledges \$5m for local journalism to boost state's 'civic health'

**Civic Information Consortium will focus on places without local newspapers and could serve as model for rest of the country**

New Jersey poised to invest \$5 million into local journalism



Jay Rosen ✓  
@jayrosen\_nyu

This is like a wind that blew on one direction for 35 years. Then one day in July the trees start bending the other way.

 **Free Press** ✓ @freepress · Jul 2, 2018

MAJOR VICTORY: New Jersey will dedicate \$5 million to reviving & strengthening local media throughout the state. No other state has done something like this.

@freepressaction conceived this legislation -- our statement:  
[freepress.net/news/press-rel...](http://freepress.net/news/press-rel...)

“What if every state in the union provided some seed money for local journalism — as a way to rebuild some of what’s been lost through years of budget cuts and layoffs? That’s what New Jersey is on the verge of doing,” said Brian Stelter, CNN’s senior media correspondent and the host of *Reliable Sources*.

Nieman Lab, a leader in coverage of the future of journalism, said the Civic Info Bill was “an official statement that communities’ information voids are a problem worthy of government attention.”

And prominent media scholar Jay Rosen of New York University said, “Wow. Not the [dollar] amount, which is modest, but the concept, which is not. This is like a wind that blew in one direction for 35 years. Then one day in July the trees start bending the other way.”

“I look forward to seeing a blossoming of innovative and grounded local-information and news-media sites and also thoughtful groundbreaking research,” said Rutgers’ Wolfson. “It’s that intersection that will take time. I think we’re talking five to 10 years to begin to see something. We hope this will be a blossoming of projects that will set the template for how news and information can thrive in 2025.”

## **Ups and Downs (and Ups!) to Funding the Consortium**

After the initial excitement over the bill’s passage and the state budget’s allocation of \$5 million quieted, all that remained was for Gov. Murphy to sign the legislation into law. And he did just that nearly two months later.

But what should have been a celebratory moment was clouded in uncertainty.

Gov. Murphy commended the Civic Info Bill in a signing statement, but said the \$5 million in funding he approved of in his budget was, in fact, unavailable. So while his signature created the Civic Information Consortium, it lacked the funding necessary for it to fulfill its mission of investing public funds to strengthen local news.

“I’m sure every state has this, but it’s particularly true in the state of New Jersey: There are a lot of bills passed that have a lot of financial obligations,” said Whiten of New Jersey Policy Perspective.

Given the state's tight fiscal situation, securing \$5 million was always going to be challenging. "I've always been worried about the funding," said Burns of the New Jersey League of Women Voters. "I think \$5 million is and isn't a lot of money. When you compare it to what else we can use the money for and how many needs the state has, it begs the question: Is this where the money should be invested? \$5 million could plug a lot of smaller holes."

After initial funding for the consortium dried up in the summer and fall of 2018, Free Press Action, the legislative champions and other partners devoted much energy in 2019 to urging lawmakers and the governor to fund the consortium in the FY2020 budget. With the support of coalition partners and New Jersey residents around the state, Free Press Action was able to push for \$2 million in funding. Since the money from the spectrum auction had all been spoken for, budget allocations for the consortium had to come out of the general fund, accounting for the reduced amount. In June 2019, the legislature passed a budget that included up to \$2 million in funding, and Gov. Murphy signed the budget that month.

With money now secured, universities and public officials began to appoint members to the board. Shortly after the first board meeting in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most of the world and the subsequent economic crisis forced the state to pull funding from the consortium.

As the state examined its finances, the consortium board continued to work, setting up bylaws, incorporating as a nonprofit, launching a website and planning for a series of public meetings to gather input from communities across the state on how the consortium should focus its energies.

In September 2020, the state passed a revised budget that included \$500,000 in funding for the consortium. This time, the funds were actually given to the organization to distribute. The consortium put out its first call for initial grantees in March 2021. In June, the consortium board awarded grants to 14 organizations across the state. The grantees are focusing on diversifying journalism, improving government transparency and providing community-health information, among other issues.

The 14 grant recipients are working in nearly every part of New Jersey. Ninety percent of the grants went to BIPOC-led projects or initiatives focused on better serving low-income people, people of color, rural communities and immigrants. For example, the Newark News and Story Collaborative will train community members to produce news that fills local and national information gaps. The Hammonton Gazette will offer news articles in Spanish and initiate outreach to both seasonal agricultural workers and more permanent members of the local Spanish-speaking community.

The Conservatory of Music and Performing Arts Society will support a project that helps young people learn about the workings of local governments and how policies and laws impact their communities.

The consortium has its own staff to manage the fund, with a board of directors to set strategic priorities and approve of grants. The board consists of: two appointees from the governor, four appointees from legislative leadership, five appointees selected by the participating higher-education institutions, and appointees representing both community groups and the media and technology sectors. Free Press Action's Mike Rispoli serves on the board, and Christopher Daggett chairs it. The consortium is influencing similar measures in states including California, which is considering creating a \$50-million fund to support local journalism.

In June 2021, Gov. Murphy signed the FY2022 budget, which includes a \$1-million investment in the consortium — doubling the state's commitment. In June 2022, Gov. Murphy signed the FY2023 budget, which includes \$3 million for the consortium, with \$1 million possibly available in additional funds.

After years of campaigning, and uncertain funding, the first round of grants was a moment of celebration — for a first-of-its-kind model to reimagine public media, and for the incredible grantees that will have resources to better inform people and solve deep-rooted issues in local media. The consortium gave out its second round of grants in April 2022.



## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the people who participated in and contributed to the Civic Info Bill campaign, especially the thousands of New Jersey residents who took action in support of the passage of this legislation. You attended events, lobbied state representatives, and shared your stories — a truly grassroots effort that created real change. None of this would have been possible without you.

We would also like to thank former Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg and Assembly Majority Leader Louis Greenwald for their leadership on the Civic Info Bill and steadfast dedication to creating more informed communities in New Jersey.

Finally, we'd like to thank the following individuals for lending their time and knowledge to this case study:

- **Craig Aaron**, co-CEO, Free Press and Free Press Action
- **Lisa Bonanno**, Gloucester County co-chair, Action Together New Jersey
- **Jesse Burns**, executive director, New Jersey League of Women Voters
- **Christopher J. Daggett**, Civic Information Consortium board chair; former president and CEO, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
- **Molly de Aguiar**, president, Independence Public Media Foundation
- **Tom Glaisyer**, managing director of program at Democracy Fund
- **Brandon McKoy**, president, New Jersey Policy Perspective
- **Shane Mitchell**, former legislative director to former Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg
- **Stefanie Murray**, director of the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University
- **Chris Satullo**, founder and CEO, Keystone Civic Ventures
- **James L. Thompson**, program supervisor at the New Jersey Association on Correction; former organizer at Free Press Action
- **Jon Whiten**, deputy director of state communications at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; former vice president of New Jersey Policy Perspective

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**Interested in learning more? Want to reimagine  
local journalism where you live?  
Reach out to Free Press Action [here](#).**

**For more information about the New Jersey  
Civic Information Consortium,  
visit its website: <https://njcivicinfo.org/>**