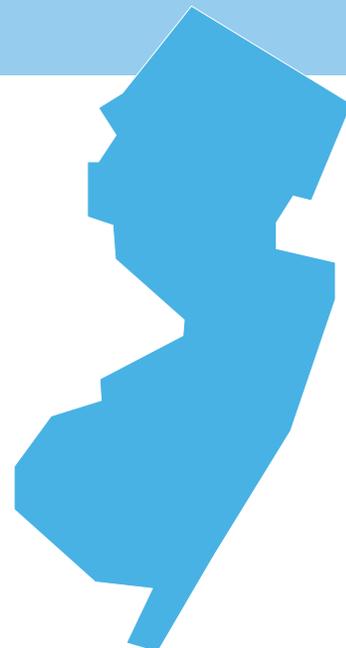


WHAT NEW JERSEY RESIDENTS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT NEW JERSEY MEDIA AND THE CIVIC INFO BILL



Free Press Action Fund held 10 community forums across the state in 2017 to gather voter input about three questions:

1. What are your vital community-information needs?
2. Do you support the idea of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium?
3. What projects could the consortium support to meet your information needs?

The New Jersey Civic Information Consortium is a joint initiative of five of the state's leading public higher-education institutions. It would invest in projects to strengthen local news coverage, community information, civic technology and civic engagement across New Jersey.

People have a huge stake in the future of journalism, but aren't usually part of discussions shaping how communities get news and information to serve their needs. That's why Free Press Action Fund went around the state to listen to residents and ask them what they want out of local media. More than 300 New Jersey residents participated in the forums. Taken together, the participants represented New Jersey's diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, age, economic class and geography.

A first round of forums was held in the spring in Asbury Park, Camden, Glassboro, Hackensack, Montclair, New Brunswick and Tuckerton.

A second round took place in the fall on the campuses of the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, Camden Community College in Camden and the College of New Jersey in Ewing Township.

HERE'S WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS TOLD US...



Photos: Timothy Karr

ON THE IDEA OF THE CONSORTIUM:

The proposal received consensus backing.

The forums attracted people from a variety of backgrounds: students, activists, teachers, nurses, service providers, faith leaders, business owners, and media professionals. Participants had a high level of news literacy and were civically engaged. It is notable that not a single person objected to the consortium as a potential use of government funds.

A vast majority saw providing public-interest journalism and civic data as a major need.

Participants viewed accurate, timely, in-depth local information as a community asset that is as worthy of taxpayer support as libraries. And, given the recent elimination of the New Jersey Network, they viewed the consortium as a means of reestablishing state support of quality news and information.

Since it's their taxpayer money, participants were adamant about how the funds should be spent.

- ▶ The consortium's investments should be equitably distributed in terms of geography, race, economic class, and those inside and outside professional newsrooms
- ▶ All projects that are funded should result in practical benefits for New Jersey communities.

Each of these concerns connects to a clear message from participants: Energetic and culturally aware promotion of grant-application procedures and full transparency about grant decisions would be vital. Both would be critical to building public trust in the consortium's mission — and in ensuring its eventual success.



Photos: Mike Rispoli

ON THEIR INFORMATION NEEDS:

Participants said they miss having a reliable stream of information about what their local governments and schools are up to. They don't want to have to depend on rumor-laden Facebook posts:

“I'm a council person in my town, and there aren't any reporters at any of our meetings anymore. In the past, the *Gloucester County Times* used to be there, more often than not. Now all I see is a lot of rumors posted on Facebook, and a lot of them have nothing to do with reality.”
— Rowan University forum participant

“Local news is just missing. You won't know about local decisions, but you will feel the effect.” — College of New Jersey student

“There used to be livestreaming of municipal meetings. Where is that now?”
— Tuckerton forum participant

“I have no idea anymore what my county does or how it spends my tax dollars.” — New Brunswick forum participant

Some forum attendees have seen sharp drop-offs in the quality and quantity of local information available in their communities.

“I live in a news desert [Warren County] that became a news desert because of layoffs and cutbacks in coverage by mainstream media that used to cover us pretty well. We actually have a contested local election in my township, first time in a while, but the only place I can get any information is on Facebook and what I read there I don't trust.”
— Montclair forum participant

“You know what I miss? The power of an old-fashioned letter to the editor. It used to be if you could get them to publish your letter, you could get your idea or your issue in front of a large portion of the whole community, and certainly everyone who was paying attention. Now, where's the outlet where a letter to the editor has that kind of impact?”
— Rowan University forum participant

Forum attendees noted that municipal and school websites are clunky, hard to use and out of date.

“The ones around here, for the township and the school district, they are just awful.” — Tuckerton forum participant

“We need so much more civic education into the basics about how towns actually work.” — New Brunswick forum participant

People want aggressive watchdog journalism on local and state affairs.

“I want to make sure we note the importance of the watchdog role. When [elected officials] are spending my tax money and affecting my life, I want to make sure there's someone in the room who's operating on an independent standard of truth.” — Montclair forum participant

People crave user-friendly coverage of local elections and candidates. And they want media to strengthen the level of political discourse.

“I hate getting all my information as a voter from political ads.”
— Hackensack forum participant

“Give people access to multiple sources that include left, right and middle viewpoints.” — Asbury Park forum participant

“Too many people talk only to people who already agree with them. We have to find more ways to get people to talk with one another where it's OK to disagree.” — Asbury Park forum participant

“I'd like to see a local [outlet] that is as aggressive about reporting the good things that happen as [it is about reporting] the robberies and murders.” — Camden forum participant (attendees at our Newark and Hackensack gatherings echoed this sentiment)

“There are a lot of stories in this community that don't come out. When I see talented dance, academic or sports groups from Camden, I'm often blown away. There's a lot of talent here, but how do we document this and shine a spotlight on it?” — Camden forum participant

People want reporting that traces global and national issues like health care, climate change and jobs reports back to their local worlds in a way they say rarely happens anymore.

“I need more information that connects the political stuff that goes on in Trenton and down in Washington back to me, my family and my community.” — Camden forum participant

They're skeptical about social media and worry that its role in politics is growing. They support media-literacy education as an antidote.

“There is a blind trust in social media. We need to lessen its influence.”
— Hackensack forum participant

Forum participants all agreed: they're sick and tired of media outlets giving endless coverage to New York City and Philadelphia while giving short shrift to New Jersey. They want homegrown outlets and journalists to cover New Jersey for its own sake, not merely for the amusement of big-city audiences. The feeling of being ignored and underserved, while expressed statewide, is particularly strong in South Jersey. Asked to sum up the state of New Jersey media on a sticky note in six words or less, here are some things participants wrote:

- NYC. Philly. Not here. Not local.
- New Jersey isn't a New York suburb.
- NJ doesn't need NYC news.
- Second place to NY and Philly.
- Philly/NYC don't equal Jersey.

A Bergen County resident made the point with an example:

“I want to know more about what's going in my neighborhood, not New York's. When they say Ridgewood, they mean Queens, not one of the largest towns in Bergen County. There are nearly 1 million residents in Bergen County alone. Why must we be the stepchildren of NYC-area media?”

IDEAS ON STRENGTHENING NEWS AND INFORMATION

Forum participants had the opportunity to share their own ideas for projects the consortium could fund and to review ideas generated by a task force of prominent New Jersey journalists that Free Press Action Fund consulted. And they voted with colored dots to reveal which ideas they liked best.

Here are some of the ideas that were frequently proposed and generally favored across all 10 forums:

- ▶ **Squarespace for New Jersey:** Create a set of appealing user-friendly templates for town, county and school-district websites, built to convey the kinds of standard information that residents typically want. By choosing a template from this resource, a community or school system could quickly and cheaply do a much better job of providing essential information.
- ▶ **#ReadLocal campaign:** A social-awareness campaign to support journalists and outlets committed to covering their communities. The campaign would aim to help local newsrooms engage more with their communities by promoting quality homegrown journalism. Working with an entity like New Jersey News Commons at Montclair State, the campaign could pick the best stories each week and share them statewide.
- ▶ **Media literacy:** Create curricula and workshops to help people of all ages, from middle schoolers to adults, become discerning media users who are able to identify fake news. Forum participants saw the state's libraries as a valuable ally in this effort.
- ▶ **Civic Education Institutes:** Develop materials and a format for local communities to set up institutes where residents could learn how local governments and school systems really work, and how to engage with them effectively and appropriately.
- ▶ **AmeriCorps for journalism:** Similar to the project "Report for America," this program would identify promising young journalists in New Jersey high schools and colleges. After students graduate from college, they would be eligible for two-year fellowships to report on undercovered communities or issues while working with established media outlets that would provide mentors and training.
- ▶ **Mini-grants for reporting:** Offer grants to independent journalists and newsrooms to enable them to work collaboratively on in-depth reports on topics that might otherwise go uncovered.
- ▶ **Digital public radio:** Return quality audio storytelling to New Jersey by offering seed money for podcasts that would cover New Jersey topics: create a podcasting platform gathering all those shows in one place for state residents to use.
- ▶ **Local data apps:** Create a digital app template that a town or county could use to provide mobile access to key government data like restaurant-inspection records, property-tax records, building-inspection data, social-service contacts, environmental data, and roadwork and traffic data.



Photos: Timothy Karr

Free Press Action Fund and its nonprofit 501(c)(3) companion organization, Free Press (freepress.net), have hosted forums about the future of local media in New Jersey since 2015. Thousands of New Jersey residents have supported the Civic Information Consortium via attendance at forums, calls and emails to elected representatives, lobby days in the statehouse, and letters to the editor. To support the Civic Info Bill or find out more, email James Thompson, jthompson@freepress.net.