



June 28, 2022

California Assembly Accountability & Administrative Committee
State Capital, Legislative Office Building, Room 357
1020 N Street
Sacramento CA, 95814

Members: Hon. Cottie Petrie-Norris, Chair, Hon. Jim Patterson, Vice-Chair, Hon. Jose Medina, Hon. Adam Gray, Hon. Freddie Rodriguez, Hon. Lori Wilson, Hon. Tom Lackey

RE: SB 911: California Board to Fund Public Interest Media

Dear Honorable Members of the Accountability & Administrative Committee:

On behalf of Free Press Action, and as a lifelong Californian, I write to convey support for Senate Bill 911, which would create the California Board to Fund Public Interest Media. If passed, this legislation would establish California as an innovative leader in revitalizing local news, which is a backbone for civic engagement and healthy democracy. At a time when accurate local news and information are in swift decline, California has an opportunity to be a model for the rest of the country.

Free Press Action is a nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organization founded in 2003 to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media. We work to advance journalism policy that supports a 21st-century democracy on behalf of our 1.4 million members in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico — including more than 100,000 Californians.

Local journalism in California, as in the rest of the country, has reached a crisis point, the consequences of which are substantially harming communities. Over the past fifteen years, over half of newspaper reporters in the U.S. covering state and local beats have been laid off. California itself has lost 25 percent of its newspapers, and total news circulation has dropped by more than 50 percent.

Californians need better access to high-quality local reporting to participate in civic affairs, connect with our fellow community members, and ensure public accountability. The destruction of local news across the state threatens the most fundamental of civic democratic values. Moreover, these deprivations have fallen hardest on poor people, people of color, rural communities, and non-English-speakers. The outlets serving these communities are

disproportionately vulnerable to the market failures at the root of this crisis, even as our communities depend most on a robust press to tell our stories as equal participants in democratic society.

With the collapse of journalism's 20th-century advertising-dominated business model, commercial advertising and private philanthropy alone are incapable of sustaining quality local news and information. SB 911 presents an extraordinary opportunity to serve Californians' information needs and reinvigorate civic life throughout our state.

The past two decades have made it crystal clear that careful public investments are the best way to confront the collapse of local journalism and maintain a robust, independent press. This legislation would allocate resources to support public-service journalism that is not always profitable but that local communities still depend on for their vitality. The funds distributed by the California Board to Fund Public Interest Media would mean more gainfully employed reporters on the ground, more coverage of critical local issues, and more civic engagement in all California communities.

The legislation's emphasis on ethnic media and prioritization of historically underserved communities would channel much-needed resources to communities whose information needs have been underserved by the status quo. These goals cannot be achieved solely through an increase in government spending on advertising in legacy publications. Importantly, however, this bill does not impose any one model for media outlets receiving that funding – and opponents' claims to the contrary are incorrect. In fact, the bill would create opportunities for both commercial and noncommercial outlets to participate.

As you consider this important legislation, I write today to correct several misconceptions perpetuated by the California News Publishers Association, among others, about public support for quality local journalism and the success of experiments in other states. Free Press Action helped conceive, organize support for, and pass the New Jersey bill that created New Jersey's Civic Information Consortium, which distributes public funds to innovative news-and-information projects throughout the state.

As California considers a proposal with some similarities to what has been created in New Jersey, it is important to understand the significant impact the Civic Information Consortium has had in its state. In its two years of operation, the consortium has awarded nearly \$1.5 million in grants, with another \$1 million to be awarded before the end of 2022 and another \$3 million allocated in New Jersey's state budget under consideration this week. Half the consortium's budget has been raised from private philanthropy, demonstrating how public funds can be leveraged to raise private dollars.

The consortium — which was created with broad, bipartisan support — remains a popular initiative, despite initial hesitancy from legacy media lobbyists that was based on the very same kind of misconceptions recently shared with this committee about SB 911. The New Jersey consortium enjoys growing financial backing from the state and the vocal advocacy of thousands of residents who have supported it, taken part in its public ascertainment process, and benefitted from the new coverage of their communities. Seventy-eight percent of the grants awarded thus far are focused on meeting the information needs of BIPOC communities, with many going toward Black and Latinx-led start-up media that are filling in coverage gaps. Other grants have been directed toward coverage of other issues lacking significant coverage in the state, including the information needs of people with disabilities, mental health in rural communities, and access to COVID-19 vaccines.

While the sponsors of SB 911 have gone to great lengths to address concerns about their bill from California’s legacy publishers, the promise of this legislation is in its support both of established but struggling outlets and new entrants committed to filling voids and covering communities that have never been fully served by established media companies. Insofar as the bill’s current text leaves room for certain improvements, we are confident that the Legislature is more than capable of addressing them in the coming weeks before final passage.

In particular, while the Board’s current composition requirements are aimed at insulating decision-making from undue political interference, we believe this end would be better served by establishing the Board as an independent 501(c)(3) organization. Furthermore, the legislation would benefit from the addition of clear guidelines defining the range of activities eligible for public funds, such as local reporting expenses, the hiring and retention of local journalists, and educational initiatives promoting journalism training and media literacy. Notwithstanding the benefits of these minor amendments, SB 911 remains a necessary intervention to revitalize local media ecosystems in communities throughout the State of California.

I applaud the Assembly and Senate for their forward-thinking leadership in serving communities’ local information needs and respectfully urge members of the Accountability & Administrative Committee to vote in favor of SB 911’s passage.

Sincerely,



Jessica J. González
Co-CEO
Free Press Action