



The Regional Reporter

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FEBRUARY-MARCH 2002

Newspapers bow to downturn

Three Washington bureaus closing

By SUSAN ROTH
Gannett News Service

Three more Washington bureaus of mid-size newspapers are in the process of closing or have closed, continuing a long-term trend associated with the shrinking of the industry and the pressure for profits.

All three papers, The Post and Courier of Charleston, S.C., The Gazette of Colorado Springs, Colo., and the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, had one-person bureaus serving daily circulations of over 100,000.

The Post and Courier, the largest newspaper in South Carolina, abruptly closed its bureau at the end of February. Correspondent Steve Piacente, who held the job for 12 years, said he was summoned to Charleston three weeks ago to get the news.

"They had decided that for economic reasons, they couldn't afford to have a Washington bureau anymore," Piacente said. "They offered me a position in Charleston, but my wife has her own career in Maryland and we're pretty well established in Rockville."

Piacente, who has three children — a college sophomore, a high school junior and a 12-year-old — had never lived or worked in Charleston, "so going there would have been total upheaval for my family." He said the news was a shock, but the editors repeatedly told him the decision had nothing to do with his performance and offered him a severance

package that he declined to detail.

Since he has always worked out of his home, Piacente said there was no overhead to cut — just his salary and telephone bill. He said he didn't see any other cutbacks or signs of economic distress at the paper.

Closing the bureau "puts any newspaper that does this in the odd position of covering elections and then not covering the people who have been elected, which is a strange dynamic," he said. "Washington is where the congressmen and senators do their business. Now they will be getting less coverage and I believe less coverage is not good for the voters."

Gazette correspondent Mary Boyle, who has covered Washington for the paper since November 1998, said she has been expecting The Gazette to close its bureau for a while and wondering when the shoe would drop.

"The paper has definitely seen some rocky times lately," she said. "I have had several editor changes since coming here and there have been two new publishers."

Boyle, who worked in the Baltimore bureau of the Associated Press before moving to Colorado Springs in 1997, covered the Colorado statehouse for a year. But she had always planned to come back East.

She proposed the bureau, argued that she could cover lots of federal issues including the area's key military installations, persuaded the

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INSIDE



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How one regional tracked down the pork flowing into his papers' district, **Page 3**



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BUREAUS

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paper to let her do the job and finally set up shop at a desk in the Toronto Globe and Mail office in the National Press Building.

At first, the editors were very interested, she said, but the situation has deteriorated in the last year. However, the decision to close the bureau "came as an edict down to my paper" from its corporate owner, Freedom Communications Inc., which also owns the Orange County Register, Boyle said. The bureau will close at the end of March. Boyle is seeking freelance work.

The situation at the Herald-Leader, a Knight Ridder paper, is less clear. The venerable paper, squeezed by Knight Ridder's recent drive for profits, has recently gone through a series of buyouts.

Washington correspondent Frank Lockwood, who worked for the Herald-Leader in Kentucky for three years before coming to the nation's capital a year and a half ago, is returning to the state this summer. He

directed questions about the future of the Washington position to the paper's new editor, Amanda Bennett, who could not be reached for comment.

While there are several positions currently vacant in Knight Ridder's Washington bureau, the chain's newspapers appear to maintain independent policies on whether to retain Washington correspondents. The Akron (Ohio) Beacon-Journal has never filled its D.C. bureau in the two years since its correspondent departed, but the Charlotte (N.C.) Observer and the Wichita (Kan.) Eagle both hired new correspondents in the last year. The State of Columbia, S.C., which just lost its Washington reporter, is looking for a replacement.

Mike Hoyt, executive editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, said the trend is due to bean-counting, but he offered hope for the future of regional reporting in Washington.

"It's just a shame, because these numbers people don't seem to realize that the reason they lose readers is that there's not enough in their

paper," Hoyt said. "If they lose the tailored Washington coverage, that's another reason to drop the paper."

"There's a sense around that people don't care much about Washington, that it's all inside the Beltway. But that's shortsighted, because from homeland security to the post office, we've seen from recent events how important government is. It has a huge impact and it needs to be monitored."

After analyzing employment numbers, Hoyt said that although overall newspaper employment has declined steadily through the 1990s, even during the economic boom, newsrooms have fluctuated more according to the economy.

"Most of the employment lost was in the backshop, in efficiencies, in technological changes," Hoyt said. "Newsrooms tended to go up and down in employment with advertising and the economy. One would hope that would continue. As times get better, we can only hope that they'll fill some of these jobs."

MEETING MINUTES

FEBRUARY 11

Present: Lisa Friedman, Angela Greiling, Jessica Wehrman, Marc Heller, Kevin Goldberg, Rachel Smolkin, Susan Roth, Brett Lieberman, Jeff Miller, Lita Baldor, Jake Thompson

After briefly discussing the fact that RRA dues letters have been sent out, Friedman briefed board members on the five candidates who expressed interest in the board opening. The five included Myron Struck, the managing editor at States News Service; Paul Krawzak of Copley News Service; Samantha Young of Stephens News Service; Steven Crane from the University of Maryland; and Claire Vitucci from Belo.

Friedman questioned Goldberg on how best to fill the vacancy, and Goldberg said the options included the board choosing a candidate or leaving the vacancy open until the elections in June. When two board members left a few years ago, he said the vacancies were never filled, and the 15-member board became a 13-member board. The board decided not to wait until June to fill the position.

Members also discussed whether to

have adjunct board positions for some of the college students who come to town and serve briefly as regionals, but Goldberg said anyone could attend any meeting of the board. Greiling suggested they fill the vacancy by determining gaps in regional representation on the board. Because Young reports on the South and the West, areas underrepresented on the board, and because she has been an active RRA member who has attended a number of newsmakers, the board finally chose and voted for Young.

The board tabled the treasurer's report for next month, as it was unavailable.

The board also discussed upcoming newsmakers. Interior Secretary Gale Norton abruptly canceled her newsmaker. Friedman said she is preparing to mail letters to all the other cabinet secretaries. Heller will try to arrange something with the new head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The board opted against having a FERC newsmaker. Baldor volunteered to organize a midterm election newsmaker for May. Friedman will try to organize an Army Corps of Engineers newsmaker.

Greiling questioned why RRA applica-

tions request Social Security numbers, and said the organization does not have all member Social Security numbers. Roth said they are collected to help RRA members gain access to White House and agency briefings where such information is requested. Greiling said she wanted to remove the request for information. The board finally decided to leave the request, but include an explanation.

The next meeting was March 4.

The Regional Reporter is published monthly by the Regional Reporters Association for its members. Please direct mail to:

Regional Reporters Association
Ben Franklin Station
P.O. Box 254
Washington, DC 20054-0254

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WEB LINK

A Web Link grab bag.

Wrong guy?

www.dredmundhiggins.com contains a database, case summaries and other information about wrongful convictions. State information is pretty easy to break out. The site doesn't claim to be comprehensive, however. It's the work of a South Carolina doctor.

Dead or alive?

www.wa-wd.com is a trivia buff's answer to the question that often plagues journalists on deadline. The site has 2025 entries organized by categories — actors, musicians, political figures and even journalists. You can look up figures from Watergate or the cast of Gilligan's Island.

Public records

www.pac-info.com says it has "the largest collection of free public records on the Internet." It's searchable by state. Also, the site has a link to information on PACER, the dial-up Internet service for the federal courts.

US vs. the world

www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/infonation/e_infonation.htm, from the United Nations, allows you to make quick statistical comparisons of countries. You can look up population, carbon dioxide emissions and even newspaper circulation figures.

Find a great link? Forward your finds in an e-mail to jmiller@tribune.com

— Jeff Miller
Allentown Morning Call

Appropriations bills

Uncovering your local cut of pork tough, but rewarding

By Jerry Zremski
The Buffalo News

We've all gotten those press releases from members of Congress touting the great projects they got inserted into appropriations bills.

But how often have we ever really looked at all those projects and tried to put them into context? How often have we compared the bacon that our members bring home with the bacon that goes to other parts of our state or the nation?

I had never done so, I must confess, in my first 11 years as a Washington regional reporter. But now I feel as if I've served my readers better by finally taking a close look at pork — member items, earmarks, whatever you want to call it — over the past five years.

Doing so wasn't easy. It took two months of full-time work — a luxury I got only because my publisher was immensely interested in the story.

But it was worth it. My three-part series, "Bringing Home the Bacon," showed that metropolitan Syracuse got nearly three times more federal pork than Buffalo between 1998 and 2002.

To begin this project, I went to the Citizens Against Government Waste Web site,

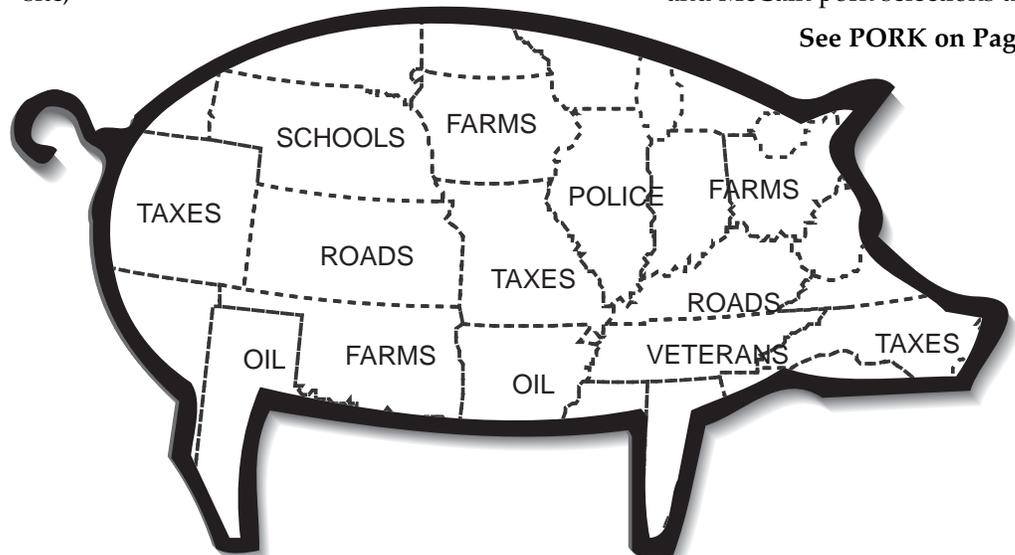
www.cagw.org. This small-government group produces the annual "Pig Book" of the "most egregious" pork projects, which many regionals write about regularly. Many people don't realize, though, that CAGW maintains an easily searchable database of every earmark, every year.

I searched the database each year to identify the New York items, and then copied the list over to an Excel file. From there, I began the time-consuming task of classifying each project by metro area. Even though I know New York State very well, doing this job took me a couple of days, using Mapquest and other Web tools to guide my way.

In the end, though, I had four lists, one per year, of every New York earmark approved by Congress from 1998 through 2001. I downloaded each list into Microsoft Access and then performed queries to identify how much aid each major metro area in the state got each year.

Doing the figures for fiscal 2002 was much more difficult, because CAGW hasn't completed its database for that year yet. So for that year, I relied on the "pork lists" on Sen. John McCain's Web site (mccain.senate.gov). Fear not: the CAGW and McCain pork selections are

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It ain't just peanuts: Uncovering local farming subsidies and buyouts

By Kirsten B. Mitchell
Media General News Service

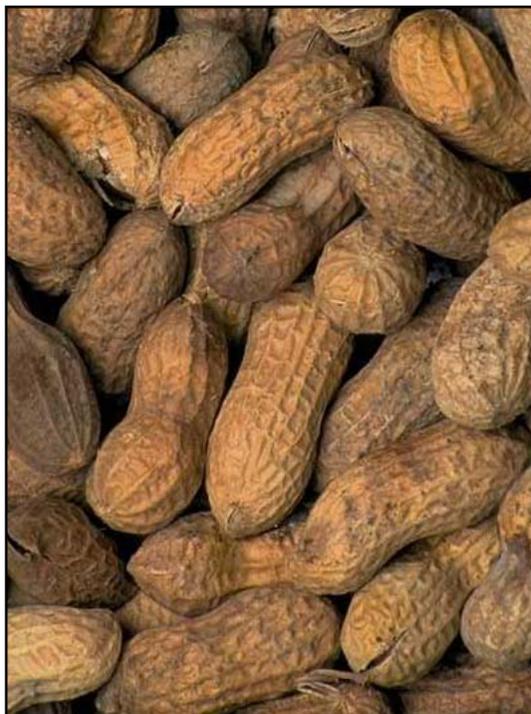
When I began covering the federal peanut program for Media General's newspapers in Alabama and Virginia, including the Richmond Times-Dispatch, I repeatedly ran across the assertion that a majority of people who own quota — the government right to grow peanuts — have little or nothing to do with peanut farming.

The assertion was among the arguments on Capitol Hill for “buying out” quota holders by paying them to get out of the business and putting peanut production solely in the hands of farmers. But no one could quantify that “majority” of people who own quota.

I decided to figure out exactly how many peanut quota owners are absentee landlords and have little or nothing to do with farming. Using the Freedom of Information Act, I obtained from the U.S. Department of Agriculture a database of peanut quota holders and growers who own land in Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia, the six states where 75 percent of the nation's peanuts are grown and where all of my 25 papers are located.

I requested the data in ASCII-delimited format and received more than 98,000 records identifying quota owners and growers by name and address, along with the farm and tract numbers and quota poundage. I dumped the data into Microsoft Access after a daylong tutorial with a colleague from Richmond who had done a similar project on tobacco and a session with Access for Dummies, a good primer.

Using Access queries, I weeded out the people who were both quota owners and growers and focused entirely on quota owners who did not grow. Then, I hit several



I decided to figure out exactly how many peanut quota owners are absentee landlords and have little or nothing to do with farming

major roadblocks, which cost weeks of time that my editor was kind enough to give me.

As I was manipulating the data, I discovered that a supposedly unique quota owner identifier was not at all unique, which required me to devise my own identifier. Using street addresses and ZIP codes, I was able to create a unique identifier that further whittled down the number of records since it was important not to have someone listed twice or more in the database.

My second roadblock came when I discovered that the quota numbers provided by USDA did not seem quite right. I interviewed several quota owners, including a congressman, whose allotments did not match up with the database.

When I challenged USDA about it, agency officials eventually conceded that all the data they had given me was wrong. They very quickly supplied me with new data and in a matter of days, I was back to where I started. I conducted dozens of spot checks with quota owners and felt

comfortable that the new numbers were correct.

Armed with numbers showing that 84 percent of Southeastern quota holders rent their quota to someone else, I used www.anywho.com to get phone numbers of quota holders. Those interviews told the real story behind the numbers. I also used Congressional Budget Office figures on the farm bill to determine that Southeastern peanut quota owners stand to gain \$873 million from a proposed buyout.

Check out Kirsten B. Mitchell's stories online at www.rra.org



RESTIVE REGIONS

Michelle Davis left The State of Columbia, S.C., for a position with Education Week in Washington. The State has not yet filled her position.

Greg Wright changed hats, returning to regional reporting in Gannett News Service's Washington bureau. Formerly writing for the GNS technology section, Wright is now covering Ohio and steel issues for GNS. Before venturing into the tech world, Wright covered Montana, Colorado and Oklahoma.

Rachel Smolkin has left the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Toledo Blade Washington bureau to freelance.

Lynch Award

Walsh wins for explaining Beltway boondoggles to Louisiana readers

BY LISA FRIEDMAN
ANG Newspapers

New Orleans Times Picayune reporter Bill Walsh has won this year's David Lynch Regional Reporting Award for a series of stories elucidating Capitol Hill machinations for local readers.

Walsh's stories included an explainer piece about President Bush's plans to alter Social Security; the saga of the prescription drug debate and why Congress is still debating it; a tale of a federal maritime program that is a well-known boondoggle but just won't die; and a look at the effects of a 1999 Supreme Court decision on Louisiana elder care.

"I think stories about how Washington works are always sure-fire stories for regional reporters," Walsh said. He described his stories as "explaining to readers in New Orleans some of the complex policy things that are kicking around up here on Capitol Hill."

The Lynch award is given annually to Washington-based daily newspaper reporters whose work "provides insight into how actions on Capitol Hill impact the local community," and "provides a better understanding of the inner workings of Congress, with an emphasis on the local delegation."

In explaining why Congress still has not passed a prescription drug benefit despite the issue's popularity among both Republicans and Democrats, Walsh found a center in New Orleans that doles out free medicine to the needy. But the group

has only enough to serve the first 60 people who show up, meaning people start lining up hours before the sun rises.

He also laid out the role that Louisiana's congressional delegation

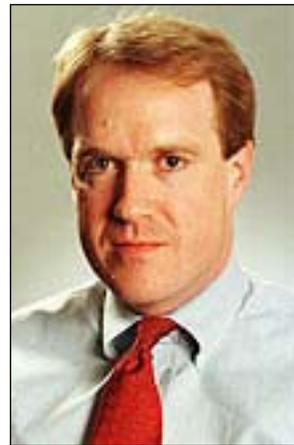
played in the battle, something he also did in the story explaining how an obscure Depression-era program that has produced windfalls for the shipbuilding industry but major losses for taxpayers still exists when nearly everyone agrees it's a money-loser.

In the story about Louisiana elder care, Walsh traced the impact of a Supreme Court decision that required states to wean themselves off of institutional health care for the disabled and mentally ill. The ruling strongly affected Louisiana, which lags behind the rest of the country in investing in home health care and other community services.

In his piece about changes to Social Security, Walsh wove in elements of Louisiana history while laying out the changes in

American mindsets that paved the way for Bush's proposal to let people invest a portion of their Social Security taxes.

When it comes to big-picture stories on issues like Social Security and Medicare, Walsh said The Washington Post and The New York Times "will cover those things better on a daily basis, but we're kind of uniquely positioned to sit back and explain it. You can put it in some perspective."



"I think stories about how Washington works are always sure-fire stories for regional reporters."

— Bill Walsh
New Orleans
Times Picayune

Check out Bill Walsh's stories online at www.rra.org

PORK

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comparable. They use the same standards for identifying pork projects: anything not requested by the president in his budget.

I sorted through the McCain "pork list" for each 2002 appropriation bill and pulled out all the New York projects. Exact funding wasn't listed for all of them, but an appropriations staffer was able to fill in the few blanks. In the end I constructed a 2002 list that was identical in structure to the earlier lists I had culled from CAGW.

Once I started running queries on Access, the Syracuse angle came clear to me, and I immediately knew it would be my lede. It's no surprise that Syracuse led the state in earmarks, since it's home to an Appropriations Committee cardinal, Republican Rep. Jim Walsh. So of course I interviewed Walsh, and then traveled to Syracuse to talk to local officials about the largess he brought home and what it meant to the area.

My work didn't stop there. I talked to every Western New York member of Congress, the state's senators, and several House members from other corners of the state. I talked to dozens of Hill staffers to find out, on background, the real story behind some of the appropriations anecdotes I picked up along the way. I talked to local government officials in Buffalo and lobbyists with an interest

in local issues.

My reporting showed that lobbying itself was indeed a separate and important story, so I also did a piece on the amount of money that mid-sized metro areas spend on Washington lobbyists. That data is available in the subscription-only section of the FECinfo.com Web site, so if you subscribe to "FEC Info Pro," you're in luck — sort of. This data, too, has to be sorted by hand into individual metro areas.

I finished the series with a piece evaluating the performance of the Western New York delegation and its individual members. This was the toughest piece of all, just because there was no objective piece of information I could use to point me to the truth. I'd recommend that if you want to replicate my series for your local audience, that you simply stick to the pork figures and the lobbying figures; evaluating a delegation's performance is just too big and unwieldy a matter to be dealt with well in one story.

I'd love to share this series with fellow regionals in an easy link, but alas, our Web site is not equipped for that. I do have my stories in a file that I can email, though, so if you'd like a copy, drop me a note at jzremski@buffnews.com.

Good luck if you decide to do this. It's an enormous amount of work. By the time you finish, you might never want to eat pork ever again, but at least you'll know that you haven't left your readers hungry for information about what all those appropriations really mean.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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