

BREAKING NEWS / COVID-19 in South Dakota: 321 new total cases; Death toll rises to 1,570; Active cases decrease to 5,040

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Newspapers close amid lingering financial struggles, COVID-19



Newspapers

THIS IS IT!

FINAL EDITION

by: [Rae Yost](#)

Posted: Apr 4, 2020 / 10:02 AM CDT / Updated: Apr 4, 2020 / 10:11 AM CDT

LAKE PRESTON, S.D. (KELO) — The Lake Preston Times newspaper is something Missy Olson said she looked forward to reading each week.

When she saw this week's edition announcing the newspaper was closing, "It was a shock," Olson, a Lake Preston resident and branch manager of First National Bank in the town, said.

Dale Blegen, the long-time publisher of the Lake Preston Times and DeSmet News, announced in this week's editions that both newspapers would be closing.

Blegen's announcement may have been abrupt but the decision, he said, comes after 10 years of trying to sell the newspapers and the residue from the Great Recession that started in 2008. The potential negative impact of COVID-19 on his business was another reason to close, Blegen said.

"As much as I hate to shut it down..." Blegen said. Blegen, 76, has dedicated more than 40 years of his career to the DeSmet newspaper and more than 30 to Lake Preston.

The closure of the DeSmet News particularly stings. Carrie Ingalls, the sister of famed "Little House" books author Laura Ingalls Wilder, worked at the DeSmet News.

"I'm only the fifth publisher in 140 years," Blegen said.

Fewer newspapers, fewer owners

The closure of two weekly newspapers leaves Kingsbury County with one newspaper.

When David Bordewyk started working for the South Dakota Newspaper Association in 1995, the state had 144 combined weekly and daily newspapers.

"Today, we have about 121-122," Bordewyk said.

Bordewyk, the executive director of SDNA, points out another troubling fact.

"In 1995, those 143 to 144 newspapers had more than 100 owners. Today, we have maybe 70 owners of 120 some newspapers," Bordewyk said.

Source: South Dakota Newspaper Association and U.S. News Deserts from the University of North Carolina
Husman School of Journalism and Media

 A Flourish chart

It used to be a publisher/owner could make a decent living with one newspaper, he said.

As operation costs continue to increase and advertising continues to drop as small towns lose population, it's challenging for small town newspapers to continue, Bordewyk said.

DeSmet's population is about 1,100 people while Lake Preston is about 500.

COVID-19 could make it even more challenging to run a newspaper because businesses that may advertise may cut those costs as a way to deal with their own COVID-19 economic struggles. Costs to operate could increase as the pandemic continues to spread.

“I’ve had many conversations with publishers and they are all very worried,” Bordewyk said. Yet, “they are hopeful,” he said.

The loss in DeSmet and Lake Preston

The front page of this week’s DeSmet News included Blegen’s opinion column about the closure of the newspapers. Below it was a story about how local businesses are dealing with COVID-19.

A one-column bar on the far left includes announcements about the local distance Easter Egg Hunt and upcoming school board meeting.

Olson wonders how people will learn about those topics in the future.

The newspapers covered school events and city council meetings.

“Even people who moved away, you know, got a subscription to keep in connection,” Olson said.

The final front page dated April 1, 2020, of the DeSmet News. Image courtesy of Dale Blegen

Who will cover those sports games and public meetings now?

Brookings, and even TV stations may cover some town news, it won't be the weekly coverage the residents get now, he said.

Blegen takes his newspaper role seriously, including the role to cover public meetings as a watchdog.

He was member of the SDNA's First Amendment for more than 20 years.

"We always made that a priority, to cover school board, city council and county commissioners as best we can," Blegen said.

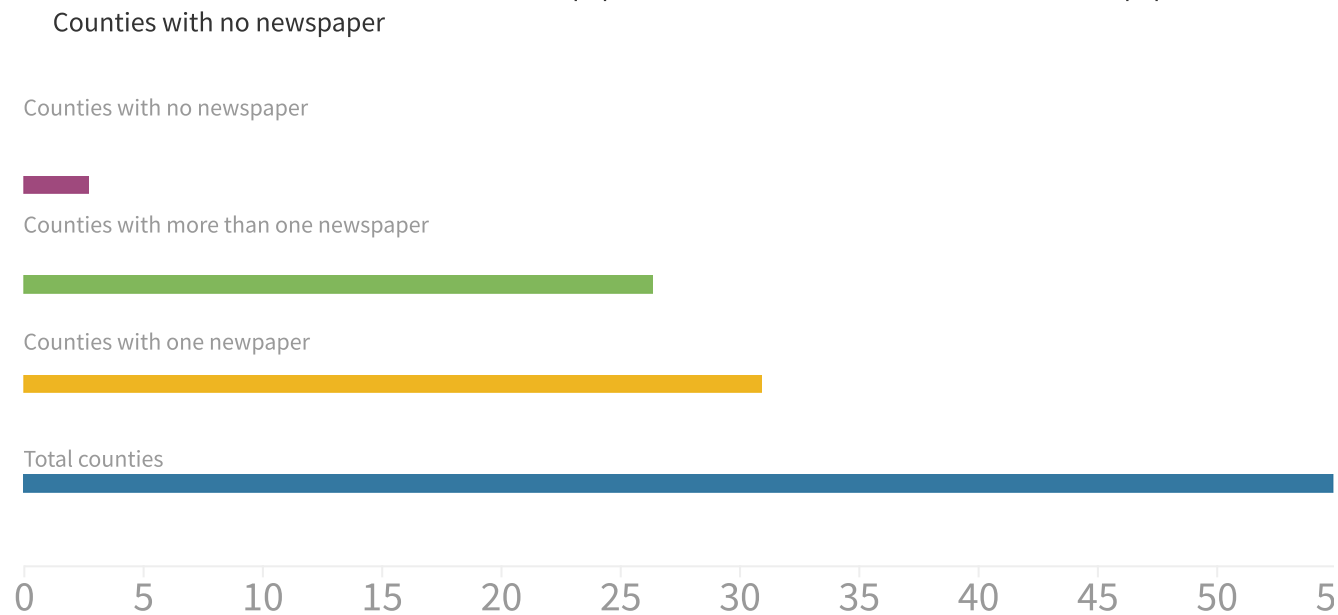
When the local newspaper isn't at those public meetings, the community loses a consistent platform for accurate and responsible information, Bordewyk said.

What's next?

Bordewyk said there have situations around the U.S. where a buyer or group has emerged to keep a newspaper from closing or to re-open it after closure.

Newspapers closed in Stickney and White Lake at the end of 2018. Bordewyk said a community member re-started the newspapers in January of 2019.

The [U.S. News Desert](#) project with the University of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism and Media has been tracking newspaper loss and related issues for several years. South Dakota has more than 30 counties with one newspaper and three counties that don't have one.



Source: University of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism and Media

 A Flourish chart

The SDNA can provide advice, information and other resources to a new publisher/owner and it has in the case of Stickney and White Lake.

Bordewyk said the SDNA has also been helping newspaper owners find a model and use methods to help their operations because the industry continues to be challenging.

He's hopeful someone or some group may step up to revive the newspapers in DeSmet and Lake Preston.

While there are challenges to operating a newspaper, the upside is owning your own business, being invested in a community and providing a responsible role to provide information to the community, Bordewyk said. Still, it's

“Maybe this will scare somebody up to come forward and buy...,” Olson said. “It’s too bad it would have to come to that...”

After closure

Blegen was in the office on April 3.

He plans to spend at least a couple of months refunding subscriptions, paying bills and handling other duties.

As of April 3, Blegen said he’s received many telephone calls from colleagues who share their wishes and understanding. One call came from Gov. Kristi Noem. Noem represented the area as a legislator.

“It was a 10 minute conversation,” Blegen said. “It was a very good conversation. I appreciate her taking that time.”

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