

When the Weekly Closed

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The weekly closed. The school board still meets. The planning commission still posts a hearing. A tax sale still needs a caption. Someone still has a duty to publish.

The question this paper asks is narrower: **who still sees the legal ad?**

Who used to see it

For generations, the legal ad rode with the rest of the paper. A subscriber who came for ball scores and classifieds also brushed past zoning and bids. That was incidental discovery. You did not have to know the clerk's URL. You had to open Thursday's paper.

UNC's Expanding News Desert reports showed how often that habit broke. By 2018, almost **200** counties had no newspaper. Half of U.S. counties were down to one paper — usually a weekly. By 2020, roughly **2,100** papers had closed since 2004. Many that remained were “ghosts”: thinner pages, fewer reporters, smaller reach.

Medill's 2025 map is the current frame: **212** counties with no local news source; **1,525** with only one left. About **50 million** people live with limited or no local news. Nearly **80%** of desert counties are predominantly rural. When a small independent weekly dies, it can create a desert overnight — Medill documented that pattern in several states in the past few years.

Who sees it after

After the weekly closes, the notice may still appear:

- in a paper from the next county over,
- on a county or city website the statute allows,
- in a remaining “eligible” outlet under state law,
- or in more than one of those places.

What often does **not** remain is the casual reader who used to stumble on the ad.

Pew's 2024 survey found only **9%** of U.S. adults preferred a print newspaper for local news. More preferred websites or social media. Medill's desert survey found that daily consumers in news deserts leaned slightly toward non-journalistic sources (**51%**) — Facebook groups, Nextdoor, influencers, friends and family — over news organizations. Many said local information was still easy to get. They were not hunting for a legal notice column that no longer sits next to the obituaries.

Florida's 2023 notice reform offers a careful, separate lesson about *visibility*, not about newspaper closures. A 2026 academic study of that law (Munevar, Nakhmurina, and Samuels) found that when governments could move notices onto county websites, newspaper notices fell sharply in counties that already had those sites — about **37%** overall, about **48%** for cities. Public-hearing notices dropped about **44%**. Website traffic did not clearly rise. Public-meeting speakers fell about **14%** in the affected cities relative to cities that kept newspaper publication. Commercial zoning permits rose about **28%**.

The authors' point was not “websites are illegal.” It was that the **channel** shapes who finds out. A newspaper page can catch someone who was not searching. A government page usually waits for someone who already knows to look.

A news-desert closure is a different cause with a related effect: the incidental audience leaves. The people left looking are the ones who already know which portal to open — or who never hear about the hearing at all.

Findings synopsis

- **UNC / Abernathy:** Mass newspaper loss left hundreds of counties with zero or one paper; ghost papers kept titles while audiences and staff shrank.
- **Medill 2025:** 212 zero-source counties; 1,525 single-source counties; ~50 million people with limited or no local news; deserts mostly rural.
- **Pew 2024:** Print is no longer the preferred path for most adults; digital and social paths dominate how people say they get local news.
- **Medill desert survey:** In deserts, social and personal sources often fill the gap; many residents do not feel deprived even when in-county journalism is gone.
- **Florida notice study (2026):** When officials could shift notices off newspapers onto county sites, newspaper volume fell, site traffic did not clearly rise, meeting speakers fell, and commercial permits rose in the comparison the authors reported. Incidental discovery mattered.

Labels that must stay clear

Notice Nearby does not claim to be the Thursday paper. Public Register Placement is complementary discoverability: a public URL, a county door, a fingerprint of the filed text, a certificate of what ran here. It does not replace statutory Legal Publication. It is not a newspaper of record. It is not government.

When the weekly closed, the duty did not vanish with the masthead. The crowd that used to see the ad often did. A register can help a stranger find the words. It cannot invent an audience that never opens the page — and it cannot satisfy a statute that still names someone else.

Sources

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