

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

“We believe a community should own its narrative, and the local newspaper must be created with and for its communities.”

Rob Curley, Spokesman-Review executive editor



COLIN MULVANY/THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

At the News Industry Mega-Conference being held in Orlando, Fla., Spokesman-Review Editor Rob Curley publicly launches the newspaper’s nonprofit, Comma, on Tuesday.

Spokesman-Review Editor Rob Curley shows off his “America Needs Journalists” shirt during a presentation announcing a new nonprofit model for journalism called Comma on Tuesday at the News Industry Mega-Conference being held in Orlando, Fla.



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COMMA

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set for 11 members and lead the nonprofit as founder and president.

“We firmly believe this is a great plan, and the community and Comma have the resources to carry it off,” Cowles said. “Of course, we’re going to be helping to whatever extent we can. We’re super excited to see this go.”

The announcement came Tuesday morning during the News Industry Mega-Conference in Orlando, Florida.

The change will not affect how readers get their newspaper, Curley said. The Spokesman-Review will continue to publish as it does currently: six days a week in print and always online behind a paywall, though stories reported and written by reporters whose positions are funded at least partially by outside grants will remain free.

When the nonprofit reaches its fundraising goal and takes over the newspaper potentially by midsummer readers will be offered subscription plans with different ways to engage with the newspaper content and process.

“We believe a community should own its narrative, and the local newspaper must be created with and for its communities,” Curley said, “especially in today’s climate, that starts with putting power back into the hands of readers and citizens.”

The agreement includes a stipulation that current employees of The Spokesman-Review keep at least the same pay and benefits, Cowles said. He noted some details need to be ironed out as Comma works to raise the initial \$2 million to trigger the Cowles’ \$2 million match.

“There won’t be any positions cut as a result of this move, per se,” Cowles said. “But we’re always looking for efficiencies, so we’ll have retirements, we’ll have restructuring, but that won’t be contingent on the nonprofit.”

Comma was founded in 2022. Comma has a relationship with Gonzaga University and other regional universities including Whitworth, Eastern Washington and Spokane Colleges, and public schools to possibly help relaunch high school newspapers.

Comma already provides a home base for the Black Lens newspaper and Northwest Passages out of its offices on the Gonzaga campus. The historic Spokesman-Review Tower at the downtown corner of Monroe Street and Riv-

erside Avenue will remain under the ownership of the Cowles Co.

Comma’s business model, developed with help and guidance from nonprofit consulting firm the Bridgespan Group, calls for donations from individuals and major local companies and institutions such as Avista Corp. or Gonzaga, for example.

Curley said what sets it apart from similar ventures is a hybrid revenue stream called the “Spokane model.” The newspaper would shift from a reliance on advertising and subscription revenue under a for-profit structure to a hybrid model that continues gathering these forms of revenue with added philanthropy.

Conversations around this model have been underway for years as Curley weaved elements of philanthropy through his eight years as editor.

He started fundraising efforts through the Community Journalism and Civic Engagement Fund, which includes-Northwest Passages book club events and collecting corporate sponsors for coverage, such as the annual-Difference Makers series.

Last year, the newspaper collected about \$300,000 from nonprofit ventures, Cowles said. Now it’s going a step further under a model that could bring in between \$800,000 to \$3 million each year.

It’s an effort to move from “a community newspaper” to “the community’s newspaper,” Curley said.

Cowles said the newspaper’s focus on a community-style of journalism has better resonated with readers, who felt they were more represented in the stories on the front page. Cowles described the style as “the way of the future.”

“(Curley’s) brand of community journalism is really what has driven this and the response he got when in the first two months, we went from 10 complaint letters to 200 love letters,” Cowles said. “What more do you need to say? ‘Well, this looks like the right formula.’ Then the question is, ‘Well, how can we sustain it over a long, long period?’ ”

The added revenue stream is necessary to the function of the newspaper as readers know it today, Cowles said. The Spokesman-Review is not immune to woes of the newspaper industry struggling with profitability and survivability.

“We’re losing two newspapers a week across the country. And we have been for three years now. The industry is in a crisis; there’s no question,” Cowles said. “That’s why you’ve got

people like us coming up with solutions like this because of necessity. If we don’t figure something out, we’re going to end up on the junk heap.”

It’s the societal shift toward digitization that has made it difficult for most newspapers.

The Spokesman-Review is generating 70% less revenue than it was in 2007, largely due to the shift from print to digital advertising, Cowles said. Revenue from subscriptions isn’t enough to compensate for this drag, even with hikes in subscription fees and value-added pricing for delivery that grew subscription revenue over the past five years, Cowles said, but even that is now leveling off.

“How do we fill the gap if we’re going to stay at some semblance of the size newsroom we have,” Cowles said.

Philanthropy, future Comma executives hope, is how to fill the gap, and for more than just The Spokesman-Review.

“It’s a way for people that are subscribers to grow into being supportive philanthropists within the community,” said Comma principal and board member Scott de Rozic, who has worked with Curley to make Comma ready for the transfer.

Once finalized, Comma’s business plans, financial models, legal documents and other details will be open source, available for the reference of other newspapers, which de Rozic hopes could help keep other publications afloat.

“We also want to deeply inform through sharing and an open source model, all of our learning’s here with the rest of the country,” de Rozic said. “Because geographically, we know we can’t fix all the problems in the country, but we want the lessons that we learned and invested money in to be available, freely available, for the rest of the industry.”

The decision to transfer the family’s newspaper, which was founded as The Spokesman-Review when W.H. Cowles consolidated the Spokane Falls Review and the Spokesman in 1893, wasn’t easy for Stacey Cowles or his family, who all weighed in on this deal.

In his sixth-floor office in The Spokesman-Review Tower, black-and-white photos of his family offer reassurance.

“I think all my ancestors would agree this is a good move,” Cowles said.

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