

# **Comma reaches financial goal to turn newspaper into a nonprofit, so WHAT'S NEXT?**

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The Spokesman-Review shared some big news with more than 800 readers last week at the Northwest Passages Book Club. The nonprofit Comma Community Journalism Lab has reached its first big step by meeting its fundraising goal.

That kicks off a period of at least 90 days to transform The Spokesman-Review into one of the nation's first community-owned newspapers.

“Something remarkable happened,” Comma founder and S-R Executive Editor Rob Curley told the audience Tuesday night at Gonzaga University. “You showed up again. Again and again. Readers became supporters. Supporters became believers.”

Comma reached a key benchmark this month by raising \$1 million in cash and more than \$1 million in committed donations. That will trigger a \$2 million match from the Cowles family, which has owned the newspaper for more than a century. “A family has taken care of this newspaper for 140 years; how do we take care of it for the next 140 years?” Curley asked readers.

Here are answers to some questions readers frequently ask about Comma, the future of The S-R and how to support local news:

Why are The Spokesman-Review and Comma building a community-owned nonprofit newsroom?

Community is our great unifier. It transcends political trends, thriving on what we have in common rather than accentuating our differences. Community helps us build trust. That's the foundation of the nonprofit Comma Community Journalism Lab. Comma is committed to telling the stories that matter most to local readers, while educating and mentoring the next generation of journalists.

At a time when two newspapers a week are closing nationwide, Spokesman-Review readers stepped up with donations ranging from \$5 to \$500,000 to support and preserve The Spokesman-Review.

The Spokesman-Review will be operated by Comma, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a "hybrid" funding strategy different from what most other news nonprofits use.

Why Comma? "From the moment we learn to read, we're taught that commas connect different ideas within a sentence," Curley says. "When we're reading, commas also give us a chance to pause and take a breath. If ever we needed a time to pause a moment to rediscover our common ground, this is it."

A comma, unlike a period, doesn't represent the end. A comma says something else is coming.

Scott de Rozic, Comma co-founder and local entrepreneur, came up with the name in the early stages of the organization.

Why is this change happening? The Spokesman-Review is one of the nation's last family-owned newspapers.

Most surviving U.S. newspapers are owned by hedge funds or corporations carrying massive debt, which bleed newspapers to death through extensive layoffs and other cuts.

Comma's mission is to save community journalism in Spokane and serve as a model for other communities struggling to publish local newspapers.

Comma will operate The Spokesman-Review as its flagship publication.

Subscriptions – print and digital – are the foundation of both its mission and its economics. Philanthropic funding and advertising revenues also contribute to the organization’s financial viability.

What are some of the new initiatives planned?

Comma has gained dedicated partners at the region’s five colleges and universities, along with public schools in Spokane and Cheney. Many of the region’s business leaders, philanthropists, grassroots organizations and nonprofit advisers, like the Bridgespan Group, have agreed to partner and invest in growing community news. The Comma nonprofit will take a journalism laboratory approach to training and mentoring the next generation of writers with students embedded inside the newsroom. As a nonprofit center for journalistic excellence belonging to the community, we are building the ultimate town square.

Why is the Cowles family donating the paper?

Publisher Stacey Cowles and the Cowles family last April decided to donate The Spokesman-Review, which turns 143 on May 19, to the community. The Cowles agreed the shift to a nonprofit would be a better way to find sustainable solutions for the long-term health of The Spokesman-Review.

Comma’s hybrid business model gives the newspaper the best opportunity to avoid future staff layoffs and further reduction of the number of days this newspaper is printed.

This week Stacey Cowles said the shift to nonprofit status means the newspaper could bring in \$800,000 to \$2 million in additional revenue each year through philanthropy.

That’s about 10% to 15% of The S-R’s typical revenue: “It’s crucial, because it’s money that will pay for special projects and experimentation, that will get us new readers, money that we wouldn’t otherwise be able to spend,” Cowles said.

How will The Spokesman-Review remain impartial if there is funding by outside organizations?

Comma has a core tenet that all contributions to Comma, Northwest Passages Book Club and the First Amendment Club are solely in support of community journalism and literary and literacy programs. Donors have no control or influence over the newspaper's editorial decisions. There is a hard firewall between funders and our journalism.

Comma follows the journalistic standards established by the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics. These include: seek the truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable and transparent.

The Spokesman-Review has had philanthropic-funded journalists in our newsroom since 2019, and have shown since then that we have some of the industry's toughest standards in regard to keeping the independence of our journalists sacred.

How can Comma ensure trust in local media, especially in a polarized political environment?

Comma is building a culture of transparency and integrity in journalism. That will include a reader advisory council, open news meetings, random source- and fact-checks and monthly informal meetings with readers. Comma is adding a people's editor, an ombudsman focused on answering readers' questions about our journalism, how it is reported and investigating concerns.

Will advertising grow?

By making this pivot now, Comma is focusing on sustaining local online advertising revenue in more cost-effective ways. With a new Small Business Network, local advertisers will be able to use innovative technology and dedicated local guides to the region to compete locally in a retail world dominated by Amazon, Google, Facebook, Instagram, Zillow and Instacart. Smaller businesses that have been financially shut out of newspaper advertising for decades may participate with an affordable entry of \$1,500 a year.

Larger businesses and organizations can become donors, allocating up to 49% of their gifts to advertising. Advertisers at our top level, called Founding Collaborators, receive 12 full-page ads annually to tell the story of the work they do in the community.

Who is overseeing Comma?

Comma's Board of Directors includes some of the community's top executives in the business and nonprofit worlds. See a list of board members and Comma leadership at [comma.cm/staff](http://comma.cm/staff).

What will happen to the staff?

The current reporters, editors and Spokesman-Review employees will be asked to join the "new" newspaper during the transition period.

What will happen to The Spokesman-Review building?

It will remain under the ownership of the Cowles family, and The S-R newsroom and business operations will continue to be located there for the foreseeable future.

What happens in the next 90 days?

Cowles Publishing and Comma are working on the logistics of transferring The Spokesman-Review to the new nonprofit. That includes migration of back-office software, setting up new accounting and payroll systems, hiring a human resources director to guide moving employees from Cowles Publishing to Comma. Comma's leadership has pledged that employee benefits, including medical insurance and 401k accounts, will match or exceed the Cowles company's benefits.

How can readers help? It's easy to participate:

- Attend a Northwest Passages event and join the conversation.
- Make a donation to the Comma Community Journalism Lab. For more information, contact Comma Development Director Yvonne Esquibel Smith at [yvonne@comma.cm](mailto:yvonne@comma.cm), by phone at (509) 220-0454 or by mail at Comma, Gonzaga University Campus, 800 N. Pearl St., Spokane, WA 99258.