

THE MURRAY SENTINEL: STRATEGIC PLAN

What assumptions support our plan?

- The public needs timely access to accurate, in-depth information; without it, civic health is impaired, and the entire community is underserved.
- In the absence of in-depth local news coverage, the void can be filled through responsible reporting by citizen journalists using social media to engage the public.
- Financial models that once supported sustainability of local news are inadequate. To compete in this rapidly changing environment, The Murray Sentinel must be current in technical innovation, reliable in reporting, flexible in decision-making, creative in generating revenue, and constantly focused on identifying and meeting informational needs of the community as a whole and under-served portions of the populace as well.

1. What is our vision?

The Murray Sentinel envisions a regional network of community-funded, locally-staffed newsrooms, ensuring public access to all local government meetings across every county in the Purchase Area. The Sentinel is the first newsroom, and for the next three to five years, it will be the focus of operations.

2. What do we do?

The Murray Sentinel provides the organizational infrastructure and the digital platform(s) necessary to publish material reports on the workings of local government, especially meetings of local boards and commissions. We raise public awareness of assessment and allocation of tax dollars; cover trends and issues that affect the community's well-being, including public education; Murray State University; public health and wellness; the arts and recreation. We report on issues/trends associated with underserved components of the community, based on race, gender, culture, religious/nonreligious preferences and socioeconomic status.

3. Whom do we serve?

Currently, The Murray Sentinel serves online users by writing and reporting on local events via a website, social media and news apps. Readers – most of them current or former residents of Calloway County, Ky – range between the ages of 35 and 54; 75% are women. We view the community as a collection of underrepresented groups that we serve, including LGBTQ+; women; people with disabilities; etc.

4. What products/services do we offer?

The Murray Sentinel reports on local events and meetings of local boards and commissions. In addition, we cover the local schools; Murray State University; public

health and wellness; arts and recreation. We also foster learning communities through partnerships.

5. What is our competitive advantage?

- With no pay wall, The Murray Sentinel is free and accessible on various social platforms, attracting users with a range of ages and interests.
- News is posted 24/7 and updated in a timely manner as information changes.
- Leadership and vision of Founder/Editor Jessica Paine is supported by a board that represents a mix of Calloway County natives and includes others whose original roots extend to the mid-west and northeast. The board represents connections at the local, regional, state, and national levels, and demonstrates extensive skills in journalism, broadcasting, public health, finance, the arts and culture, fundraising and strategic planning.

6. What factors are key to our success in the next 1-2 years?

Funding, audience development, collaborating with other online news sites in the region, recruiting skilled writers, establishing a track record for thorough, relevant and timely reporting. In addition, we need to make use of current technical tools for tasks like tracking donors and audience feedback, and engage with current and future readers – particularly in underserved portions of the populace – through focus groups, meetings, presentations, sponsoring/hosting local events, etc.

7. Key success factors that support sustainability in the next 3-5 years include:

- Paying staff members and training volunteers.
- Exploring and/or expanding additional funding sources, e.g., grants, foundations, sponsorships, individual memberships, etc.
- Deepening existing connections to skilled writers and other online regional and statewide news sources, e.g., Hoptown Chronicle, Forward Kentucky, Northern Kentucky Tribune, Kentucky Lantern, WKMS-FM, Institute for Rural Journalism & Community Issues, etc.
- Devising creative ways to connect with readers.
- Assessing gaps in coverage and monitoring needs/challenges to underserved portions of the community, including members of racial/ethnic/religious/gender minority groups, families with children eligible for free and reduced lunch, etc.
- Ensuring visionary and responsible coverage by adding skilled regional reporters, providing useful learning opportunities, evaluating their performance, and providing useful feedback, when needed.
- Expanding the board to include regional/minority representation.
- Breaking important stories that expand readership and enhance The Murray Sentinel's reputation as a reliable, professional provider of local news.

8. What are our shared values?

- We seek truth and report it because we believe local news coverage is the bedrock of democracy.
- We foster the free and civil exchange of information and opinions.
- We treat sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as people deserving respect.
- We act independently and serve the public and the community, avoiding conflicts of interest and any appearance of conflicts.
- We are accountable, taking responsibility for individual work and organizational integrity.

ACTION PLANS (for next 1-2 years in the following areas)

1. Administration – Monitor expenses against budget; adjust as needed. Secure board financial support and establish roles/responsibilities of board members. Create job description of executive director and development director and establish a timeline for providing performance feedback. Determine additional staff needs and hire accordingly.
2. Finances – Secure additional operational revenue; create a funds development campaign with emphasis on grass roots support; decide levels of support and donor benefits; set specific targets for ad sales, commercial sales, advertisers vs. underwriters. Pay executive director, development director and writers.
3. PR/Marketing – Launch new website, monitor and adjust as needed; promote specific beats. Invite guest writers with statewide and national profiles; select platforms – FB, Newsbreak, etc. – that best serve our mission. Sponsor presentations and public forums by political candidates and local leaders in collaboration with local/regional organizations. Promote leadership capabilities/skills of the board. Develop a regular, online newsletter for subscribers.
4. Partnerships – Create official agreements with WKMS, Hoptown Chronicle, Kentucky Lantern and other regional resources to share stories and information and to collaborate on stories about issues that affect the region and its individual counties. Continue seeking input from Institute for Nonprofit News and LION Publishers, as well as other online news organizations, such as Athens County Independent and Link NKY.
5. Target Coverage – Post original news articles at least 8-10 times/week. Secure competent volunteers to cover local boards and commissions. Attend their meetings and report on their actions and decisions.
6. Technology – Identify equipment needs and additional technology gaps. Secure IT expertise. Continue refining website.
7. Leadership – Secure high-profile grants and awards for local coverage and become members of organizations that support professional development and lifelong learning of board members, executive director and other staff.