

February 23, 2009

Stimulus to highlight state news beat cuts

David Ward

The federal stimulus package has received ample attention from the media in recent weeks. However, a future stage in the stimulus story will focus on the battle among the states to get their shares, as well as what projects each governor decides to fund.

Covering that story might pose a challenge for news organizations because outlets began trimming their statehouse staffs years ago.

'Capital reporters are almost the canaries in the coal mine because we've been seeing declines in numbers since the 1990s,' notes Tiffany Shackelford, executive director of Capital Beat, an association of state-government journalists. 'Now you have this huge amount of money pouring into the states, even as many of them try to cut back in other ways, and there are fewer reporters to watch it. Even the Associated Press is cutting back on (its) state coverage.'

That decline in the number of reporters in the capitol has resulted in less frequent coverage of important state government issues, says Cosmo Macero Jr., a former Boston Herald statehouse reporter and now a VP at O'Neill and Associates.

'If it's a big story, you'll find (journalists covering it), but you just don't see the army of reporters day in and day out covering the state,' he explains. 'In addition, the volume of stories has dramatically decreased, so you end up with a lot of top-down coverage of major state-government issues.'

Some of the drop in print and local broadcast stories is offset by other sources. Bloggers and online news sources cover some state assemblies, and dedicated statehouse news services cover others with content aimed at politicians, lobbyists, and other insiders. Yet some big stories are still missed, says Edward-Isaac Dovere, who edits the New York State-focused monthly *The Capitol*. He points out that state capitals are often a launching point for national page-one stories.

'The past 18 months have been incredibly interesting in Albany, (NY), with everything from (the prostitution scandal surrounding former Gov.) Eliot Spitzer to Caroline Kennedy's US Senate (consideration),' he adds.

Macero notes that media relations has evolved because there are fewer statehouse reporters available.

'You need to move beyond the confines of politics and look for ways to make these state issues relevant as business stories, community stories, or even lifestyle stories.'

John McGovern, counselor with Chicago-based Resolute Consulting, adds that state legislatures aren't nearly as traditional in their outreach as they once were.

'Press conferences at the state capitol are still a strong way to reach a large audience, but you may not attract a major market like Chicago with an event in Springfield, (IL),' he says. 'So now you see even state legislators leveraging Twitter or Facebook to connect directly to their constituents.'

PITCHING ... State government

- Many state legislatures are only in session during the first half of the year. When they're not at the capitol, reporters have more time to do backgrounders on issues

- Reach beyond the political beat reporters to localize pitches by focusing on the business or community impact of state actions and laws

- Public radio and TV still have a presence in most state capitols, and many still air weekly shows that are great vehicles for shaping opinions on state-specific public-policy issues