



— National Trust for —
LOCAL NEWS

REPORT FROM A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT
LITTLETON INDEPENDENT
July 2022

Executive Summary

In 2021-2022, the National Trust for Local News and the Colorado News Conservancy launched an audience research and community engagement project in Littleton, Colorado. Our research effort enabled the leadership and reporting staff of Littleton Independent, one of the 24 newspapers in the Colorado News Conservancy, to engage more deeply with the people and causes in Littleton, to learn about community priorities for residents, and to model similar outreach in the other communities served by the Colorado News Conservancy.

In this report we share takeaways from our reader survey, three focus groups and town hall meeting. This project provided the Colorado News Conservancy and Littleton Independent with insights into the current perceptions of the paper and the community, including what excites residents about living in Littleton, the most pressing issues facing the city, and ideas for how the paper can deepen residents' understanding of, and engagement with, the issues that matter most in their lives. The research also touched on perceptions of the media as well as specific products and services readers would like to see offered by the paper.

The key takeaway from the community research points to a widely held desire for something that seems so simple it could be mistaken for obvious: more local reporting.

Hearing directly from community members about their relationships with the paper and their opinions about critical areas of local concern are fundamental components to the continued success of both Littleton Independent and the newspapers that form the Conservancy. As Publisher Linda Shapley and her team set reporting priorities moving forward, they will leverage these primary findings, gleaned from our research. Indeed, the team has already launched a new reporting series focused on the top issue identified by this study: housing.



Primary Findings

Respondents would like to see more substantial reporting on local government, growth and development within Littleton, and housing issues.

- + Housing—especially affordable housing—is the top concern of respondents, regardless of age.
- + Littleton’s younger residents (age 18-34) are very concerned about the effects of climate change on Littleton and beyond.
- + The cohort of 35- to 44-year-olds are interested in local business and traffic coverage.
- + Individuals ages 45-64 prioritize homelessness as a key concern.
- + Those ages 65+ want to know more about crime and homelessness.
- + Across the entire survey cohort, the subject that generated the least amount of interest was COVID-19 developments, followed by education policy.

Solid, consistent, community-oriented reporting is critical to maintaining trust and building audience, according to respondent data.

People see Littleton Independent as a community resource and would like more hyperlocal and service-oriented journalism (e.g. resources and directories, nonprofits, events, personal stories) as well as a more robust point-counterpoint approach to the opinion section. Examples of responses include:

I hate how dramatized the news has become. I would like it to be more factual, less alarmist.

Not enough coverage of the arts and arts events. The newspaper should offer free space for promoting arts events, perhaps subsidized by the city. Colorado Community Media should allow arts organizations to promote their events free in all community papers’ online calendars instead of limiting free listing to just one calendar.

Littleton Independent arrives in my mailbox too late for me to attend events and activities!!

The three focus groups we conducted had different emphases. The first, made of longtime readers and residents, expressed deep concerns about the changing nature of Littleton and the impact of development. These residents want to see more investigative and accountability journalism focused on issues of development and city government. The second, comprised of nonprofit and city leadership, presented a more forward-looking view of the changes in front of Littleton and the informational and service needs of its residents. Homelessness, affordable housing and growth were all issues this group was concerned about. The third focus group, which included a dozen nonprofit leaders from the area, pinpointed the need to make the local news produced by Littleton Independent more accessible for those who cannot afford a subscription. In addition, accuracy in the news is a big concern for the participants. They want an unbiased community newspaper to focus on true local news and pointed out concerns related to “clickbait” and the quality of national news today.

Action

Results from the survey and input from the focus groups and town hall are already having an impact. Among the steps underway are:

1. **In-depth reporting on the critical issues identified by residents.** With the knowledge that housing is the number-one concern among survey respondents, journalists at the Colorado News Conservancy's 24 publications, including Littleton Independent, have begun work on a multi-week reporting series that will focus on the housing crisis in the Denver metro area. The reporting will be in-depth and solutions focused—two things that focus group participants said they wanted to see more of from Littleton Independent.
2. **More ways to access the news.** CCM is launching additional e-newsletter products focusing on arts, entertainment and local businesses.
3. **Continued engagement with readers and the community.** Discussion of the survey and focus groups was presented to a town hall of about 15 community members in June. Staff members are also pursuing the possibility of periodic "Coffee and a Newspaper" or "News and Brews" events to keep the conversation going.
4. **Reporting Capacity.** Littleton Independent and other papers in the Colorado News Conservancy are actively seeking funding to hire more reporters to satisfy the community's obvious hunger for increased local news coverage.



Additional Information

A total of 131 individuals completed our eight-question survey. We shared the survey over free and paid social media channels, through in-paper advertising and targeted email campaigns. The Littleton city government also highlighted the survey in its e-newsletter. Reminders were sent to readers three times, and the survey was closed when it reached 130 respondents over a roughly two-month period.

It is important to note that the majority of survey respondents are highly educated and/or highly compensated, older, white individuals. The results of this survey do not highlight substantially the views of either young individuals or people of color.

- + Hispanic individuals ranked housing growth/density, crime, COVID-19 developments and housing affordability as their main focus.
- + Those who identified as non-white viewed housing growth/density, housing affordability and homelessness as their most important topics.
- + White individuals view housing growth/density, homelessness and housing affordability as their most interesting topics.
- + Those making less than \$50,000 per year viewed housing affordability, housing growth/density and crime as their highest concerns.
- + Individuals in the \$50,000-\$100,000 income bracket view housing growth/density, crime and housing affordability as their highest priorities. Individuals making \$100,000 or more per year view housing growth/density, local business and COVID-19 developments as their main concerns.

If you would like a copy of our survey questions, focus-group processes or a far more detailed report, including responses to open-ended questions, please contact Carrie Porter at carrie@ntl.org.

About the National Trust for Local News

The National Trust for Local News is a nonprofit dedicated to keeping local news in local hands.

We work with communities to catalyze the capital, new ownership structures, and business model transformations needed for established local and community news organizations to thrive and remain deeply grounded in their communities. You can read more about our work at www.ntl.org.