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A Comparison of the 1974-76 Coverage by the
Great Falls Tribune and Missoulian of the
Montana Local Government Review Process

by

Famelia Austin Newbern

B.A., University of Montana, 1983

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies

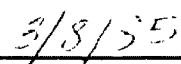
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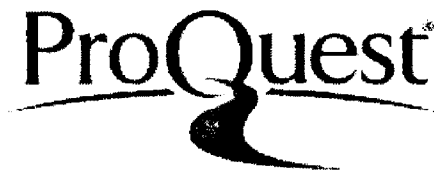


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Newbern, Pamela A., M.I.S., June 7, 1985 Interdisciplinary

A Comparison of the Coverage by the Great Falls Tribune and
the Missoula Missoulian of the Montana Local Government
review Process from 1974 through 1979
(114 pp.)

Director: Warren Lrier

Coverage by two Montana newspapers--the Great Falls Tribune
and the Missoula Missoulian--of a local-government review is
examined in this study.

The review, from 1974 through 1979, was mandated by the
State Legislature.

This thesis analyzes and compares the coverage by the two
dailies and describes their influence on the review process
in their respective cities.

Examined are the newspapers' frequency and nature of
coverage, error or bias, and editorial opinions. Editors and
members of the city and county review commissions were inter-
viewed to determine their opinions about the review and media
coverage.

Standards established by the American Society of Newspaper
Editors and the National Conference of Editorial Writers were
used to evaluate news stories and editorials.

The coverage and editorial stance of the newspapers differed
markedly, and possible reasons for those differences are
discussed.

The author concludes that the two newspapers were instru-
mental in educating the public about the review and in help-
ing the state carry out its mandate in the two cities and
counties.

PREFACE

I would like to thank Dr. Warren Erier, Dr. Richard Drake and Dr. James Lopach for their encouragement, help and advice with this thesis. I also wish to thank Brian Rygg for his support and also for the use of his typewriter, without which this thesis would have no q's.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In June and November of 1976 respectively, the Missoulian and the Great Falls Tribune reported that city residents had voted down proposed changes in their local governments.

Reporters and editors must have been both relieved and sad when the election results came in. For more than two years, the proposed changes in the local governments of both cities had provided their respective papers with regular news stories and fodder for editorials. Now, except for a few wrap-up stories and editorials explaining why the proposed governmental changes had failed, the long story was over.

Yet the question of the newspapers' role in that story was unanswered. And the roots of the story itself stretched back more than four years to the adoption of a new Montana State Constitution in 1972.

A Mandate For Change

As part of its article on local government, the 1972 Montana Constitution required that:

. . . the legislature shall, within four years of the ratification of this constitution, provide procedures requiring each local government unit or combination of units to review its structure and submit one alternative form of government to the qualified electors at the next general or special election.¹

That requirement was spurred by the expanding local governments

in Montana and dissatisfaction with the limits placed on them by the 1889 Constitution.² According to Thomas Payne, University of Montana professor of political science and former member of the Montana Commission on Local Government Study, the late 1960s and early 1970s was the time when local government in Montana took on increased importance.³ Payne said it was the goal of the members of the Constitutional Convention to provide for increased public participation in local government when they decided to include a section in the revised constitution mandating a local government review every 10 years for each governmental unit in the state. Before the adoption of the 1972 Constitution, local governments had only those powers specifically granted to them by the Legislature. One Missoula review commission member characterized the situation this way:

Local government in Montana has been operating under a framework of laws which were basically a result of the 1889 Constitution. . . . The Constitutional Convention felt that it was time that the people of Montana be given an opportunity to vote on changing their form of government if they so desired.

Local government in Montana has been operating under what is known as the "Dillon Rule." This is a dictum provided by the federal courts in the 19th Century., and basically it states that all local government is completely subject to the control of state legislatures and that local governments can only exercise such powers as are granted them by the state. As a result, local government in Montana has been subjected to severe restrictions and has had virtually no leeway to solve local problems. There is a national trend to grant more and more power to local governments, since these are the government entities which are closest to the people. The Constitutional Convention wants to encourage that process and give local governments the opportunity to exercise much greater power than had heretofore been the case.⁴

The review provision also was an outgrowth of the belief local governments should be more accountable to voters as the governments became more powerful. Thus, while the review provision was inserted

to reflect the expansion of local governments, it also was provided to serve as a check to that expansion. The Constitutional Convention hoped that by including the review provision Montanans would be able to choose the form of local government best suited to their communities' needs--one that would allow them to exercise as much control over the government as they deemed necessary.

Because of the 1972 Constitution, Montana became the first state to require review of local-government structures. The review mandate was fleshed out in early 1974 by legislation that ordered county commissioners, city councils and city commissions to approve by April 15, 1974, resolutions authorizing the creation of city and county study groups.

Residents ran for seats on the study commissions as non-partisan candidates. The commissioners were elected in the Nov. 5, 1974, general election and began meeting Nov. 26, 1974. The commissions had until Oct. 1, 1975, to study their existing forms of local government. Under legislation passed by the 1975 Legislature, they could then choose from one of five optional forms of local government or write their own charter.

Before the review process began, 123 of Montana's 126 municipalities were using a form of government known as the commission-executive or mayor-council form, comprising an elected commission and one executive elected at large. Fifty-five of Montana's 56 counties used the commission form, consisting of an elected commission that usually holds all legislative, executive and administrative powers.

Besides the commission and the commission-executive forms,

local-government study commissions also could choose from the following forms of local government:

Commission=manager (also known as council-manager), comprising an elected commission and an administrative manager appointed by the commission.

Commission-chairman, comprising an elected commission and a commission chairman (who may be called a mayor or president) elected by members of the commission from their own number.

Town meetins, comprising an assembly of voters, an elected chairman and an optional town meeting moderator. This is one of the most purely democratic forms of government and was limited to towns with populations of less than 2,000 by the 1972 Montana Constitution.

Charter, which allows communities to write their own "constitutions," which, in general terms, allow them to engage in any government operation not specifically prohibited by state law.

In addition to the above forms, the 1974 Legislature provided 12 suboptions that modified the six optional forms of government. Suboptions included such amendments as partisan or non-partisan elections, appointment of administrative assistants and the selection process for department heads.

Commissions, with that wide range of choices, were required to propose an alternative to their existing governments by June 1, 1976, and submit a tentative report on it to residents.

After public hearings on the tentative report were held, the commissions had to adopt a final report by Aug. 1, 1976. A voter referendum had to be held on the proposal by Nov. 2, 1976. Several

commissions completed their work ahead of the final dates, and many referendums were held before November 1976.

In the end, 27 of Montana's 126 towns and cities, and four of the state's 56 counties, adopted new forms of government. Sixteen of the communities adopting new forms also opted for "self-governing" provisions. Three communities; Fort Benton, Ismay and Thompson Falls, did not hold elections on alternative forms.

Role of the Press

The press, especially newspapers, played a major role in Montana's local government review. Papers throughout the state kept residents informed about the review processes. Newspapers explained proposed governmental changes, commented on the review process and served as forums for public debate on the issues. The newspapers were one of the means by which Montana carried out the review process.

Just how significant a role Montana newspapers played in the review process has never been determined. It can be argued that the papers had it in their power to change the very shape of their local governments through the power of editorial persuasion, the content and slant of news stories and the amount of coverage given to the review.

This thesis analyzes the media's role in the review through case studies of the Great Falls Tribune and the Missoulian. Both covered the review extensively. Both are representative of major Montana dailies.

Three sources will be used to analyze their roles: news stories,

editorials and interviews with editors and members of the city review commissions (in the case of Missoula, the city and county commissions were combined). Two sets of criteria will be used in the analysis, one for editorials and one for news stories. These criteria will be explained more completely later.

The divergent nature of the nation's press makes it difficult to judge it under one set of guidelines. Locale, ownership and scope, as well as the type of newswire subscribed to (Associated Press, United Press International) or lack thereof, all contribute to this diversity. Nevertheless, most newspapers, including the Missoulian and the Great Falls Tribune, voluntarily subscribe to general guidelines. In addition, libel laws and public opinion serve as checks upon their power.

The following guidelines will be used to judge the news stories for clarity, scope of coverage, fairness and accuracy. The papers also will be judged for placement of the stories, to ascertain whether they keep the review in the public eye.

The following guidelines are taken from the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles, adopted in 1975.

1. The primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time.

2. Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public. They must be vigilant against all who would exploit the press for selfish purposes.

3. Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety as well as any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict. They should neither accept anything nor pursue any activity that might compromise or seem to compromise their integrity.

4. Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.

5. To be impartial does not require the press to be unquestioning or to refrain from editorial expression. Sound practice, however, demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified.

6. Journalists should respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news reports.⁵

A second set of guidelines will be used to judge editorials for accuracy, balanced and factual presentation of both sides of an issue and frequency. Frequency is included since it is a sign of how important the paper thought the review was.

The following code was adopted by the National Conference of Editorial Writers in October 1949.

1. The editorial writer should present facts honestly and fully. It is dishonest and unworthy of him to base an editorial on half-truth. He should never consciously mislead a reader, distort a situation, or place any person in a false light.

2. The editorial writer should draw objective conclusions from the stated facts, basing them upon the weight of evidence and upon his considered concept of the greatest good.

3. The editorial writer should never be motivated by personal interest, nor use his influence to seek special favors for himself or for others. He should hold himself above any possible taint of corruption, whatever its source.

4. The editorial writer should realize that he is not infallible. Therefore, so far as it is in his power, he should give a voice to those who disagree with him--in a public letters column and by other suitable devices.

5. The editorial writer should regularly review his own conclusions in the light of all obtainable information. He should never hesitate to correct them should he find them to be based on previous misconceptions.

6. The editorial writer should have the courage of well-founded conviction and a democratic philosophy of life. He should never write or publish anything that goes against his conscience. Many editorial pages are the products of more than one mind, however, and sound collective judgment can be achieved only through sound individual judgments. Therefore, thoughtful individual opinions should be respected.

7. The editorial writer should support his colleagues in their adherence to the highest standards of professional integrity. His reputation is their reputation, and theirs is his.⁶

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT FALLS TRIBUNE'S COVERAGE OF LOCAL-GOVERNMENT REVIEW, 1974-1976

On Nov. 2, 1976, Great Falls residents voted 2-1 to retain their commission-manager government structure. The vote followed more than two years of preparation by state officials and a five-member government study commission that had proposed an alternative form of government for the city.

The study was an educational process for everyone involved--history in the making. The 1972 Montana Constitution had mandated local-government reviews for all Montana municipalities. Many of the laws concerning local government were passed by the Legislature in 1975, a few months after study commissions throughout the state were formed in November 1974. The Great Falls study commission prepared an alternative proposal for the city amid public apathy and disagreement among commission members.

The story of the review process and the people who participated in it is told in the pages of the Great Falls Tribune between 1974 and 1976. Since the Tribune spent so much time covering the review process, the question arises of what role the paper played in the event. Did it serve as an objective channel of information for voters, or did its reporting and editorials sway voters in their rejection of the alternative form of city government? Did other factors influence

the paper's coverage?

To answer these questions, an analysis of the paper's coverage is necessary. The voter-review process itself must be reviewed, as well as its treatment by the paper in both stories and editorials. Only then will it be possible to determine what role the Tribune played in the review.

THE REVIEW

The actual Great Falls review began in November 1974, with the election of the Great Falls Local Government Study Commission. Yet preparations for the review had been under way for months in Great Falls and throughout the state.

In March 1974, Montana Gov. Thomas Judge had signed a bill that created a temporary state commission on local-government study. The purpose of the committee, according to the Tribune, was to develop comprehensive "information about local government structures,"¹ including their powers, duties and methods of finance.

At the same time, Judge also signed a bill that mandated that local governments throughout the state create local-government study commissions. The local governments were to decide how many members the review commissions would have and how they should be elected. In July the Great Falls City Council provided for a five-member commission to be elected in November. Three of its members would be elected by districts and two at large.

At the end of June, the State Commission on Local Government released a proposed bill, eventually passed by the 1975 Legislature,

that allowed local governments to choose among six forms of government, as well as disincorporation or consolidation with other local governments.

Great Falls study commission applicants were required to file for candidacy by Aug. 1. In November five members were elected: Patrick Paul, Henry Espelin, Jack Stimpfling, William Artz and George Swanson.

Meantime, the state local-government study group, known as the Montana Commission on Local Government, was also busy. In August, it released a calendar of 23 public hearings, research forums and workshops related to local government that it would hold throughout the state.

Many state residents were puzzled about the review process. At a joint meeting of the Montana League of Cities and Towns and the state review group at Billings, the Tribune reported many Montana League of Cities and Towns members queried the state group about various aspects of the review. Great Falls City Commissioner Donald Ostrem was quoted as asking whether the Great Falls Study Commission was "absolutely bound to submit an alternative form of government to local voters."²

It is evident the state group was doing its job, for residents of Great Falls were aware of the review process. On Oct. 8 the Tribune reported someone had stretched a sign across the front of the Great Falls Civic Center that read "The Dictators are Ripe For The Kill."³

A similar incident had occurred Dec. 6, 1972, when a sign on the

civic center marquee was changed to read "Throw the rascals out." At that time, Great Falls was undergoing an angry battle over whether to replace its mayoral form of government with a commission-manager form.

The memory of the bitter 1972 battle was often present in the 1974-76 review process. In 1972, Great Falls had been governed by a commission-executive (council-mayor) form of government for 86 years. The city was in the midst of an economic recession caused by the layoff of several hundred people when the Anaconda Company reduced its refining operations in 1972. In addition, there was great unhappiness with the mayor-aldermanic form. Residents contended the form "resulted in poor accountability, considerable influence-peddling, rampant favoritism in policy making and little professionalism."⁴

In 1972, the city was in serious financial difficulty, resulting in part from improper expenditures by the mayor and councilmen. Great Falls is a strong union city, owing to the presence of the Anaconda Company and the Great Northern Railroad. When the city's financial situation worsened, the Great Falls labor movement withdrew its support of the old government and advocated a city-manager form. Proponents of this form believed "City Commissioners would be better qualified and more public-interest oriented than their predecessorsCity affairs would be better administered because a professional manager would be hired, and lines of authority and responsibility would be clearly laid out."⁵

When the issue of which governmental form to choose came before Great Falls voters Dec. 7, 1972, they voted 4-1 in favor of the

commission-manager system. In spite of that mandate, resentment lingered among some residents and resurfaced in the 1974-76 review.

This resentment is mentioned in the Tribune's Oct. 8, 1974, caption under the picture of the sign hung across the civic center. Almost two years had passed since the new government had taken over:

. . . but not all has been smooth. Advocates of the losing form of government have challenged issues on many occasions and wait hopefully for the day when their system is returned to run the city.⁶

The sign had been placed on the building the night before, and the Tribune reported the next day that "opponents of the city commission, as it operates, were responsible."⁷

On Nov. 2, the local-study group was elected, and it met Nov. 26 to begin its review of local government. For the next nine months, until August 1975, the group was busy reviewing Great Falls' city government, interviewing officials and trying to identify the existing government's strengths and weaknesses. Only when it completed that study did the group feel ready to consider ways the existing government might be changed.

As was stated earlier, the 1975 Legislature had widened the alternative forms of local government from which the group could choose from. In addition, the state local-government commission was busy touring Montana, holding a series of workshops reviewing and explaining the review.

The city study commission's study of the government had been so low-key in Great Falls that the Tribune did not mention it during the entire seven months of the study. Once the group began consider-

ing new forms of government, however, its low-profile image changed.

Disagreement was rife among commission members from the beginning of the study on alternative forms. The Tribune reported Aug. 14 that the commission "agrees on only one thing--that they do not agree on which alternative form of city government to recommend to the voters in 1976."⁸

Commission members argued about whether they should focus on a charter or on city-county consolidation. Some felt such a study should wait until after the group decided which alternative to present to voters. The group did agree it wanted public participation in the review process, and public hearings were held in late September.

Residents were often outspoken at such hearings. About 50 attended a meeting Sept. 16, including Great Falls Commissioner Curtis Ammondson. The Tribune quoted Ammondson as saying Great Falls city government should consolidate with Cascade County's government, since he had found that problems facing Great Falls extended beyond the city and could be better dealt with by a larger governmental unit.

Other residents disagreed with Ammondson. Forrest Hedger, president of Northwestern Bank, said Great Falls already had changed its government and another change was not needed.⁹

Roger Young, executive director of the Great Falls Chamber of Commerce, read a Chamber Board of Directors statement that said the commission-manager form of government should be allowed to endure.¹⁰

In October, the city study group began inviting city officials to the group's regular meeting to give their views on how local government should be changed. The Tribune quoted several officials

in various stories, including Russel Conklin, Cascade County auditor, who had been in government since 1925. Conklin said he opposed city-county consolidation because Montana city governments were archaic in structure and needed to be changed before a merger would be advantageous. He recommended a charter be written for Great Falls, saying that would be the best structure for the city.¹¹

In November, the Tribune ran a guest editorial by Dale Harris, director of the State Commission on Local Government. Harris said voter review of local government was an expression of the state's commitment to reform and revitalization of government by the people-- "democracy in action."¹² In keeping with the state group's purpose of educating residents, Harris went on to explain the review process in his editorial and urged residents to participate.

But residents who participated in the Great Falls government review found the process hampered by disagreement among group members. The group seemed to agree only to disagree on what form to propose to voters. A Nov. 5 Tribune story reported William Artz had presented at a Nov. 3 meeting of the group a paper calling for a change in structure from the commission-manager form. Jack Stimpfling, who was not present at the meeting, wrote a letter stating he did not want to present a position until more discussion on alternative forms had taken place.

Pat Paul said he thought a city manager would be good and also recommended increasing the number of city commissioners from five to seven. Henry Espelin disagreed, however, saying the study commission should concentrate on trying to improve the financial structure

of city government. George Swanson favored increasing the number of city commissioners but suggested some should be elected from districts and some at large.

The argument continued throughout November and into December. The city group had begun meeting with the Cascade County Local Government Study Commission to discuss service transfers between the two governments. The two groups eventually decided not to transfer services, and most members agreed it should be a decision made by departments.

In December, the city group disagreed on how the executive branch should be organized. The Tribune reported William Artz favored an elected executive with an administrative assistant. He said the executive should have broad powers, as opposed to the weak-mayor position that existed before 1973 in Great Falls. Jack Stimpfling said he thought it was in the best interests of the city to retain the basic commission-manager form. He added, however, that he favored limiting the powers of the city manager, especially the manager's ability to hire and fire personnel.

In January 1976, the city and county group embarked on a tour of several towns in the county to talk with residents about consolidating the two governments. City-group member Jack Stimpfling had said in December 1975, that he didn't think the governments would consolidate, but he wanted the city group on the record as having discussed the possibility.¹⁴

A public hearing on consolidation was held Jan. 12 at the Great Falls Civic Center. Study commissioners from the surrounding towns

of Belt, Neihart, and Cascade were invited to attend. The Tribune reported residents' views on the consolidation proposal would be heard but that many city commissioners had expressed opposition to consolidation. In addition, the city and county groups had never formally met to discuss consolidation.

The Tribune endorsed the consolidation hearing in a Jan. 12 editorial. The editorial harkened back to the 1972 battle to change local government. The former city clerk, Fred Hill, had complained that some departments under the former mayor were "little empires" and that the thought of losing control was upsetting to the department heads."¹⁵ The Tribune's 1976 editorial said that:

The possibilities of consolidation [have been] discussed at commission meetings, but no concrete proposals for such a merger have been advanced. Most study commission members consider it politically unrealistic at this time to urge a consolidation program. Some of them think there is considerable merit in consolidation.

Commission members realize that many city and county officials have mental blocks about consolidation because they want to guard their own precious spheres of influence.¹⁶

At the Jan. 12 meeting, city-group member Henry Espelin proposed formal joint sessions of the city and county study groups to study the "pros and cons of cooperation or consolidation."¹⁷

Three city-group members voted for the proposal, but two others joined three county group members in opposing it. County group chairwoman Marie Tierney stated the most important duty her group had was to provide an alternative-government structure that would allow the county to operate more effectively.

Many of the approximately 60 people who attended the hearing expressed opposition to consolidation. For example, Martin and

William Dawson, of Belt, expressed fears that rural county residents would end up paying Great Falls' bills under a consolidated government. Both said rural citizens "want no part of consolidation."¹⁸

In the middle of January, the city group announced it was tentatively commissioning a \$3,700 survey of attitudes of city voters. The survey would be supervised by two Charles M. Russell High School social studies teachers and would be conducted by 80 CMR students.

By the second half of January, the city group's study was beginning to coalesce. On Jan. 19, in spite of objections by Henry Espelin, the group approved the formation of a two-person committee charged with studying the feasibility of writing a charter for city government. Espelin objected on grounds the commission had not agreed to propose a charter. He thought a charter should be written by all five committee members, not just the two on the committee. In addition, he stated he did not think city voters wanted to adopt a charter and the study group should concentrate on proposing modifications to Great Falls' existing city-manager government. Espelin left the meeting before the proposed motion to form a committee was made, but he told a Tribune reporter he would have voted against the proposal if he had not had another meeting he had to attend.

In February, the commission's efforts to formulate an alternative escalated. On Feb. 11, Jack Stimpfling submitted to the group a charter proposal that featured self-government powers and modification of the existing commission-manager form. Stimpfling's proposal advocated increasing the number of city commissioners from five to seven. It called for a ceremonial mayor elected from candidates

running specifically for the position. The mayor would have no administrative duties but would serve as a citizen advocate during his two-year term. Under the existing government, the city commissioner receiving the highest number of votes became mayor.

Stimpfling said he drew up the proposal to clarify his own thinking on the matter and to stimulate discussion with his fellow committee members.¹⁹

By the second half of February, the commission was nearing its goal of creating an alternative-government proposal. On Feb. 16, the group decided its alternative would include a charter granting self-government powers. Stimpfling made the proposal to write a charter, saying self-government powers would increase the ability of residents to regulate their own affairs.

Throughout March, the commission members labored to formulate their alternative plan. The group was concerned with trying to decide what form its charter would take. The group was divided between advocates of the commission-executive form and those who favored retaining a commission-manager form with modifications.

On March 15, commission member Pat Paul presented a charter proposing adoption of the commission-executive form. The group then tried to resolve the differences between Stimpfling's proposal, which had been submitted Feb. 11, and Paul's. Under Paul's form, the executive or mayor, would be elected separately from the city commission and would be in charge of the city's executive and administrative matters. Stimpfling's charter contained only a minimum description of government structure, powers and duties, while Paul's charter

listed the administrative structure for several government functions.

On March 22, the commission tentatively decided to recommend to voters a charter based on a commission-manager form. The members were unable to resolve the issue of whether to adopt Stimpfling or Paul's proposal and decided to work together to examine both Paul's and Stimpfling's charter to determine if differences between them could be worked out.

In late March, an unresolved issue from the 1972 governmental change surfaced when "some dissidents"²⁰ who were unhappy with the existing commission-manager form began complaining that the city had promised residents they would vote on whether to return the pre-1973 mayor-aldermanic form to office in 1976.

Apparently, the 1973 city-government reformers had promised that mayor-council advocated would have a chance in 1976 to vote on whether to return that form of government to office. However, the promise was based on the 1972 Constitutional mandate for local-government review every 10 years. The 1972 city-government reformers were referring to the fact that residents would be able to suggest a return to a mayoral form in 1976 if they wished. There was no promise made that the form would be the alternative proposed, only that residents would have a chance to propose it. The Tribune pointed out that the study commission formed in November 1974, did not exist when the "promise" was made.

Residents' criticisms of the city group's work continued into April. On the fourth, the Cascade County Democratic Committee complained that the group had not given residents a "choice."

Several Democrats said the group should offer voters a mayor-aldermanic form. The Tribune quoted Ann Allen, a former alderwoman, as saying she did not support the old mayor-aldermanic form because it had flaws. She said, however, that a strong-mayor form could be offered as an alternative, since it had been "promised" that voters could decide whether to return that form to office in 1976.

The city group also revealed the results of a poll done by 80 CMR students. Henry Espelin said the poll showed the people of Great Falls were satisfied with the existing form and that a mayor-aldermanic form would fail if it were put on the ballot.

On April 9, the Tribune addressed the issue of whether voters had been "promised" they could decide whether to return the mayor-aldermanic form to office in 1976. The paper said it was difficult to determine who had made the promise and suggested some "overzealous reformers might have implied such a choice."²¹

Some citizens might have misinterpreted what reformers really said, confusing the difference between the promise of a chance for a return and a commitment for a return to the mayor-alderman form.²²

The Tribune said the commission had considered the mayor-aldermanic form but suggested that unless residents could show more support for it, the study commission should retain its proposals for a charter and modifications of the existing city government.

Disagreement among group members continued throughout April. Although it had agreed to propose a charter featuring a commission-manager form, the group had not decided whether to propose a suboption for an elected mayor or an appointed manager as the city's

executive officer. Pat Paul had proposed that the group recommend a charter defining an administrative officer's position. Under his proposal, voters would then answer a separate question (suboption)--whether to fill the position with an executive or a manager. In a tie vote, the group defeated the suboption proposed by Paul. Espelin said he opposed the proposal because the suboption would present "two distinctly different governmental forms"²² to voters. He thought it would be difficult to construct an acceptably written suboption.

By May the group was being forced by the June 1 deadline to agree on a tentative alternative proposal. On June 1, the group had to present an alternative proposal to the public for comment.

On May 1, the group voted 4-1 to approve a tentative charter proposal calling for retention of the commission-manager structure with modifications. The group also agreed, 4-1, to place a suboption on the ballot to determine if elections should be conducted on a partisan or non-partisan basis.

Pat Paul voted against the charter. With William Artz, he submitted a minority report calling for an additional suboption to the charter. They said voters should be allowed to determine whether they favor an elected executive or appointed manager to head government.

Paul did not explain why he opposed the charter but told the Tribune after the May 1 meeting that he would have preferred the group recommend a charter he had written.²³ He had proposed earlier in the May 1 meeting that the group consider his draft, but the motion died for lack of a second.

On June 1, the group submitted its tentative proposal to residents and began three months of public hearings. During one hearing in July, supposed to center on a proposed ballot suboption that would give voters a choice between an elected an appointed mayor, 22 residents turned out to debate the strengths and weaknesses of mayor and manager forms and whether the study group had an obligation to give the voters a choice of an elected mayor instead of an improved manager alternative.

Many of those attending the hearing were from the Great Falls Area Chamber of Commerce and supported the group's proposed alternative of an improved commission-manager form. Others, from the Democratic Central Committee, argued in favor of a mayor-aldermanic form.

The city group continued to make changes in its tentative charter. On July 28, Jack Stimpfling presented a suboption to the charter that he said would provide a government form with a strong mayor and checks and balances. Under Stimpfling's proposal, the elected mayor would be the chief administrative officer of the city and would, among other duties, enforce ordinances and resolutions, perform duties required by city laws, carry out policies established by the council, attend council meetings, make recommendations, participate in discussions and report to the council. The mayor would not be a voting member of the council.

Henry Espelin opposed Stimpfling's proposal, saying he thought the commissioners were responsible only for giving the electorate a choice between retaining the existing city manager commission form or suggesting a city-manager commission form with a charter.

Espelin's dissent continued into August. On the fourth, the Tribune reported Espelin had issued a minority report to be contained in the commission's final report to voters before Oct. 2. In his report, Espelin called the commission's alternate proposal "a disaster."²⁴ He contended the proposal was risky, confusing and inadequate and suggested the study commissioners had a distorted view of their duty.²⁵

Espelin's report said the commission-manager form was working "remarkably well" and that the study commission had received no evidence that a major structural change would be beneficial. Referring to the pre-1973 form of city government, Espelin said an elected mayor might not be competent in administration and could use his appointment powers to give jobs to "friends, relatives and political hacks."²⁶ Reform of government inefficiency was a major theme of the 1972 campaign to replace the government.

The commission continued to revamp its tentative proposal, and on Sept. 30 released its final alternative. The group proposed a modified commission-manager form of government with a charter allowing the city to do anything not prohibited by state law.

In addition, the proposal contained two suboptions. The first would allow voters to choose between an appointed and an elected administrator. An appointed administrator would be appointed by the city commissioners and would be a manager, the same as the existing form. An elected administrator would be a mayor elected by the voters, responsible for administrative duties. He would appoint one or more administrative assistants and could veto ordinances and

resolutions, subject to override by a majority of the commissioners.

The second suboption gave voters a choice between partisan and non-partisan elections. Under the existing form, commissioners were elected on a non-partisan basis.

During the following month, residents and organizations considered the proposal. On Oct. 21, the League of Women Voters supported the retention of the commission-manager form. In a two-page statement, the League said the city group's proposal, with its two suboptions, was too confusing. In addition, the League opposed a return to the old mayor-aldermanic form and urged voters to retain the existing government.

Other groups favored the city review commission's proposal. On Oct. 27, the Tribune reported the Cascade County Democratic Committee and the Cascade Trades and Labor Assembly had endorsed the city proposal. The Democrats had donated more than \$700 to promote the final charter and its suboptions.²⁷

Residents opposing the proposal had formed the "Citizens for Existing Form of City Government." The group had collected about \$5,500 to buy radio, newspaper and television advertising opposing the proposal. The committee chairman was Curtis Ammondson, former Great Falls mayor (he had retired at the beginning of 1970) and a city commissioner elected at the first commission-manager election.

Despite the endorsements by Democrats and labor leaders, the proposal failed to pass. On Nov. 2, residents voted 12,143 to 6,512 to retain the existing government. The city manager was retained over an elected mayor by 11,421 to 8,170. Non-partisan

elections were preferred to partisan 13,152 to 4,596. With the defeat of the charter, however, the outcome of these two suboptions became moot.

THE TRIBUNE'S TREATMENT OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

The Great Falls Tribune began covering the review in March 1974, with the preparations for the elections of local-government study commissions. During the next 32 months, the Tribune printed 89 stoires, editorials and letters about the process and the efforts of the city local-government study commission to propose an alternative to the city's existing government. A breakdown by year of the paper's coverage may be seen from Table I.

To determine the Tribune's role in the review, the paper's coverage was analyzed. Among the factors studied were its frequency of coverage, bias, errors, editorial content, story placement and use of wire-service stories. The paper's coverage is considered by year. General conclusions concerning the total coverage are presented before criticisms or final judgments are made.

TABLE 1

	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Editorials</u>	<u>Letters</u>
1974	18	1	
1975	13	1	
1976	25	10	1

THE TRIBUNE'S 1974 COVERAGE

Throughout much of 1974, the state and Great Falls were busy

preparing for the review process. All 18 stories and the one editorial run by the Tribune that year dealt with preparations for the process, rather than the review itself.

Most of the stories dealt with the efforts of the Montana Commission on Local Government to inform readers about the review. Since the state commission also met in other cities, the Tribune relied heavily on Associated Press stories in 1974.

TABLE 2

Authors of 1974 Tribune stories

Associated Press	8
Staff writers	5
No bylines	5
Editorials*	1

*The Tribune, like most Montana newspapers, followed the policy of not signing its editorials.

Until July 1974, the Tribune's stories on the review dealt exclusively with the state commission's efforts to inform Montanans about the review. The Tribune regularly ran stories on the issue, as may be seen from Table 3.

TABLE 3

Breakdown of Tribune's 1974 coverage by month

<u>Month</u>	<u>Number</u>
March	2
May	1
June	2
July	6
August	3
September	3
October	2

Most of the Tribune's 1974 coverage was in July. Residents

wishing to run for the Great Falls Local Government Study Commission had to submit a petition signed by 100 registered voters by Aug. 1, to be on the November ballot. This resulted in a flurry of stories in the Tribune about the candidates and the review.

Concern about public apathy prompted the paper's only 1974 editorial on the review:

Many Montanans who have been disgusted with real or imagined faults or weaknesses of local government have a chance to do something about their beliefs.

August 1 is the deadline for filing for the review commission spots. Some first rate candidates have filed but there has been a sorry degree of apathy in many communities and counties.

Citizens interested in good local government should file for the commissions or encourage highly qualified candidates to do so.²⁹

After its July 24 editorial, the paper did not mention the candidates for the city local-government review commission again. Instead the remaining eight stories in 1974 dealt with the changes the review process could make in local governments. They explained the review in detail or examined proposed legislation that would change state laws on the forms local government could take.

There were no instances of bias in the Tribune's 1974 coverage. However, there were three errors. The first, in a May 10 story headlined "Practical approach needed, too, in local government, Mizner says," said the local-government study commissioners would be elected in November 1974 and would begin meeting in January 1975. In a July 6, 1974, story, the Tribune correctly stated the commissioners would begin meeting Nov. 20, 1974.

The second error, in an Aug. 19 AP story headlined "State voters now have chance to overhaul local government," said that 45 of

Montana's 46 counties had a commissioner form of government. Montana has 56 counties, 55 of which had a commission form at the time. (Petroleum County had a commission form but hired an executive officer to conduct the county's business.)

The third error occurred in the Oct. 8 outline on the sign placed in front of the civic center. It stated that the 1972 vote to change Great Falls' government from mayor-aldermanic to commission-manager form had been on Dec. 8, 1972. The actual date was Dec. 7, 1972.³⁰

The Tribune generally placed its stories on the issue on pages six through 10. (See Table 4.) The paper generally placed its review stories on a page containing other community stories, usually obituaries, reports on local crimes and local events such as meetings. These pages did not carry regular headlines such as "Community News" and were not otherwise set off from news in the paper.

TABLE 4

Placement of 1974 Tribune stories

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Editorials</u>
1-5	3	
6-10	11	1
11-15	1	
16-20	1	
21-25	0	
26-30	2	

THE TRIBUNE'S 1975 COVERAGE

Most of the Tribune's 13 stories and one editorial in 1975 on the city review dealt with efforts of the Great Falls Local Government Study Commission to decide which alternative form of government it

wanted to recommend to voters in November 1976. Most of the stories were by staff writers or locally written with no byline.

TABLE 5

Authors of 1975 Tribune stories

Associated Press	2
Staff writers	7
No byline	4
Editorials	1

Many newspapers do not place a byline on a story under a certain size. At other times, bylines may be cut to fit more of the story on the page. Papers must cite a source, such as the Associated Press, if a story is not written by staff members.

In 1975, the paper carried no stories on the city-review until August. A breakdown of the paper's coverage may be seen from Table 6.

TABLE 6

Tribune's 1975 coverage by month

<u>Month</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Editorials</u>
May	1	
August	1	
September	3	
October	1	
November	5	1
December	2	

A story in May dealt with a Havre workshop on local government. Northern Montana College sponsored the meeting which city and county

study commissioners from 10 counties in northern Montana attended. The workshop was held so the commissioners could exchange information on the progress of the voter review throughout Montana. The story does not mention whether Great Falls commissioners attended the event.

On Aug. 14, the Tribune began its 1975 coverage of the city review per se. The story was by Denise Mort, a staff writer who had worked part time at the paper for several years and who had just started working full time. Mort had not been assigned to cover the review before, and her story contained unattributed conclusions:

/Commission member Henry/ Espelin argued that research on /Commission member Pat/ Paul's suggestions would not be necessary until the commission decided definitely to include them in its presentation to the voters and that research might be a waste of Williams' time. Following his thought through, he then suggested that if research is done on one suggestion, it should be done on others and made the motion for another research project.

General discussion pointed out that Paul's suggestions are very broad. . . . 31

In September, two Tribune stories summarized a University of Montana Bureau of Government Research report by UM political science professors James Lopach and Robert Eagle. The study focused on the problems Great Falls encountered in March-October 1973, during the transition from the mayor-aldermanic form to commission-manager. The story, by staff writer Ralph Pomnichowski, called the report "thought provoking"³² and suggested the current local-government review commissions might be able to learn from it.

Beginning in late September, the Tribune began covering the weekly city-review commission meetings on a semi-regular basis. It ran stories on commission meetings on Sept. 18, Oct. 10, Nov. 5,

Nov. 12, Nov. 16, Nov. 19, Dec. 3 and Dec. 10. The group had finished its study of Great Falls' existing government in August and had begun to discuss alternative forms. Commission meetings often were marked by disagreement among members on which alternative form to recommend to voters. The Tribune reported those disagreements, such as one at a Nov. 3 meeting:

Four members of the Great Falls Local Government Study Commission expressed little agreement Monday on an alternate form to propose at next year's general election.³³

Such disagreements notwithstanding, no evidence of bias was found in the Tribune's stories in 1975. There were no errors in the stories.

The Tribune's only editorial relating to the city-review process ran on Nov. 3, by Dale Harris, director of the State Commission on Local Government.

Unlike its 1974 coverage, the Tribune's 1975 coverage was spread throughout the paper, although the greatest number of stories were again on pages six through 10. As in 1974, the stories appeared with other items of community note and were not set off from other news. A breakdown of the paper's 1975 story placement may be seen from Table 7:

TABLE 7

1975 Tribune story placement

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Editorial</u>
1-5	0	1
6-10	5	
11-15	3	
16-20	2	
26-30	2	
31-35	1	

THE TRIBUNE'S 1976 COVERAGE

Election year 1976 marked the Tribune's most extensive coverage of the review. The paper ran 37 stories, letters and editorials on the review, more than the total of all the stories in 1974 and 1975. A breakdown of the Tribune's 1976 coverage by month may be seen from Table 8.

TABLE 8

Tribune's 1976 coverage by month

<u>Month</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Letters</u>	<u>Editorials</u>
January	9		3
February	2		0
March	3		1
April	4		2
May	3	1	1
June	0		0
July	3		1
August	1		0
September	0		2
October	2		0
November	1		0

In January 1976, the Tribune ran more stories on the city review, nine, than it ever had before during one month. They included three editorials, two of which appeared Jan. 15. The city review commission was hard at work trying to prepare a tentative alternative proposal and was aware it had only five months until it must present the proposal to residents.

The issue appeared on the front page of the Tribune on Jan. 12 for the first time in the review. A public hearing was to be held that evening on city-county consolidation. The Tribune said that:

. . . a public hearing to air citizens' attitudes toward consolidation of Great Falls and Cascade County governments will be held this evening, although future action by the meeting's sponsors appears unlikely. . . . Action beyond receiving comments, however, is not being predicted by study commissioners. Members of the county group--which would have to concur in any consolidation proposal--have never formally discussed the idea, and most have spoken out oppsing consolidation for the next few years.³⁴

The Tribune reported the next day on page one that:

Three Cascade County Study Commissioners Monday defeated a formal proposal that local government review commissions jointly study the possibility of consolidation between county and Great Falls governments.

. . . Sentiment expressed by the 14 persons testifying at the hearing was generally opposed to consolidation.

Most of the opponents feared a consolidated government would be removed from citizens' control and not responsive.³⁵

In an editorial on Jan. 15, the Tribune rebuked the public for its apathy toward the review "despite extensive publicity efforts."³⁶ The paper also suggested that some of those who attended the public hearing on Jan. 12 were "reported John Birch Society members."³⁷ The paper then told the public to "do some homework for the next meeting" instead of launching "ideological diatribes at the commissions and walking out and disturbing the proceedings by talking loudly in the halls."³⁸

The paper's 1970 coverage contained no errors but did have one instance of possible bias. This occurred in April, when the tribune carried a story by staff writer Carla Beck on criticisms voiced by the Cascade County Democratic Central Committee at a meeting to discuss the city group's tentative proposal. The Democrats said the proposal didn't allow residents to vote for a mayor-aldermanic form.

The story presented both sides of the issue. City commission

member Henry Espelin answered a charge by Democrat Ann Allen, who said voter reviews were unconstitutional:

Henry Espelin, a member of the Great Falls Study Commission, asked Allen to clarify her position. "You seem to be saying voter review is okay if we propose the mayor-aldermanic. But now you say the whole thing is unconstitutional. Which side of the fence are you on?" he asked.³⁹

There was the possibility of bias in the story, since a July 29, 1976, story lists Beck as one of the Democratic Central Committee members. The Tribune did not carry stories about the Republican Central Committee's opinions on the issue, but this was because the Republicans had stated they did not believe politics should be involved in the selection of government forms.⁴⁰ Beck's stories presented both sides of the issue, but the possibility of bias was there, nevertheless.

From May until October, the Tribune ran nine stories about the city-review, most of which dealt with the group's tentative proposal of a commission-manager form in a charter granting self-government powers. Four editorials in that period, in which the study commission's tentative proposal was undergoing public review, defended commission member George Swanson's voting record and noted comments on the review process by Washington Post columnist Neil K. Pierce.

The last two editorials, on Sept. 30, noted the city group's final proposal had been published. One said the proposal deserved attention and explained how it differed from the existing city government. The second said voters should reject two proposal suboptions that gave voters a choice between an appointed and an elected administrator and partisan and non-partisan elections.

The editorial said:

The commission-manager form of city government has been in power just $3\frac{1}{2}$ years. That's not long enough to work out kinks that still exist. If voters approved the suboptions, they would be reintroducing partisan politics without having given the present government a fair test.⁴¹

The Tribune's three remaining stories on the review appeared Oct. 21, Oct. 22 and Nov. 2. The last story reported the defeat of the proposal.

All the Tribune's 1976 stories were on the city group and were written by local writers. No Associated Press stories were used:

TABLE 9

Authors of 1976 Tribune coverage

Staff writers	18
No byline	8
Editorials	10
Letters	1

Like its 1974 coverage, the Tribune placed its stories mainly on pages six through 10, although a larger number were on the first five pages than in the two previous years.

TABLE 10

Placement of 1976 Tribune stories

<u>Page</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Editorials</u>
1-5	0	1
6-10	13	8
11-15	2	
16-20	1	
21-25	1	
26-30	1	
31-35	0	1
36-40	2	

As in other years, the stories were not set off from other news stories. They continued to appear on pages carrying other community news.

There was only one further instance of note in the Tribune's 1976 coverage. One headline, on April 26, contained a strong dose of confusion, and may have mislead readers. It read "Tie Vote Kills Charter Proposal." On March 22, the city group had agreed to recommend tentatively a charter based on a commission-manager structure. The April 21 story dealt with a proposal by commission member Pat Paul that the group recommend a charter defining an administrator's position. Although the group defeated Paul's charter proposal, it continued to work on a tentative alternative form that featured a charter granting self-government powers to the city. The headline, while accurate, was misleading since it made readers think the group had scrapped its entire plan for a charter form. In reality, it had only rejected a suggestion by Paul to be included in the charter form.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that public apathy doomed the city group's proposal to failure. From the beginning, the review was plagued by resident disinterest and the Tribune reflected this view. According to Jack Stimpfling, city group member, "during the latter part of the review, we became concerned by the apparent lack of public interest in the review process."⁴² Stimpfling went on to explain that:

An attempt was made to heighten public interest by running

spots and interviews on radio stations, KEIN, KMON, KARR-KOPH and KUDI, as well as the two TV stations KFDD and KRIV. . . . The study commission had a positive attitude towards the radio, TV and newspaper coverage. The level of public interest was generally so low that any attention we received was welcomed with enthusiasm.⁴³

An unsigned statement from another city group member⁴⁴ said residents' apathy was due mainly to the 1972 changeover in Great Falls' government. He stated "The time was too short for opinions to be formed on the new manager-commission format. The citizens were not in the mood for another change."⁴⁵

Because the 1972 government changeover was so bitterly fought before it was resolved, it may be concluded that residents were tired of the issue and did not wish to see it brought up again. In addition, the new government had not really had a chance to govern for long before the state-mandated review began. Former Tribune editor William James said he felt the new government had not had a chance to prove or disprove its ability to govern.

"We were happy with the city commission-manager form--it was efficient and professional," he said.⁴⁶

Thus, the Tribune advocated retaining the government. In addition, residents had overwhelmingly voted the new government into office in 1972 and seemed satisfied with the job it had done through 1976. It seems obvious that both residents and the Tribune saw little need for governmental change in Great Falls and reacted to the state's order to review their city government with disinterest.

The Tribune printed 12 editorials about the review, and one letter, 10 of which appeared in 1976. The editorials contained no errors,

and one, on April 9, 1976, corrected an earlier error. Unlike many papers, the Tribune did not set aside a certain page on which editorials appeared. However, the editorials on the issue almost always appeared on the first 10 pages of the paper. The sole letter appeared May 9, 1976, on page 30, the editorial page for the day.

The Tribune's coverage contained three errors, all minor, during the three years of the review. There were two instances of bias in its coverage; an Aug. 14, 1975, story by Denise Mort that contained some unattributed conclusions and an April 21, 1976 headline that was more confusing than biased.

During the course of the review, the Tribune placed 29 of its stories, regardless of size, on pages six through 10. Most of the Tribune stories on the issue were at least three-columns wide and about 12 inches long.

Most of the Tribune's stories and editorials were written by staff writers. One editorial and 10 stories were written by other authors. Thus, 11 of the Tribune's 60 articles on the issue, or about 18 percent, were not written by the Tribune staff.

The Tribune also ran 33 stories about the Cascade County Local Government Study Commission's review process from 1974 to 1976. Staff writer Leon Lenz wrote 20 of the Tribune's stories on the city group and 15 on the county group. Five other staff members wrote at least one story on the city review: Denise Mort, John Barber, Ralph Pomnichowski, John Pearson and M. Thomas Leam. Carla Leck wrote about the review only as it pertained to the Democratic Central Committee.

CRITICISMS OF THE TREATMENT
OF THE LOCAL-GOVERNMENT REVIEW BY THE TRIBUNE

According to William James, editor of the Great Falls Tribune during the city's review, the paper educated the public about the issue.

"A lot of the people weren't quite sure how to vote," he said. "Our policy was to let the public know quite thoroughly what was going on."⁴⁷

How thoroughly the tribune let the public know what was going on may best be judged through an analysis of the Tribune's news stories and editorials, using the standards set forth in chapter one.

The Tribune carried 57 news stories about the review of Great Fall's government from 1974 to 1976. The first article in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' statement of principles says that "the primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time."⁴⁸

There are two major gaps in the Tribune's coverage of the review, when few or no stories appeared. The first was from November 1974 to August 1975, when only one story on the issue was published. Another was from August to November of 1976, when four stories appeared.

Both of those periods were important in the review process. The review commission was elected in November 1974 and immediately began its study of Great Falls' existing government. The review commission finished its study in September 1976 and published its alternative proposal. Yet the Tribune gave little or no coverage to the issue

during those periods. This lack of coverage did not "serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time."⁴⁹ Many residents remained ignorant of the review process, in part because the Tribune did not cover it.

When asked about those gaps, James said he was not aware of them and attributed any break in coverage to reporters being ill or on vacation.⁵⁰ According to Stimpfling, the Tribune covered the issue in the following manner:

The study commission met weekly throughout the period of the review. During the first 5 months, the meetings were covered by a reporter from radio station KEIN. The reporter, Mr. Leon Lenz, was then employed by the Tribune but continued covering the meetings. When he was unable to attend the meetings, the Tribune provided a substitute. KEIN replaced Mr. Lenz with another reporter. In effect, we had continuing coverage by the Tribune and KEIN. As mentioned earlier, the Tribune did not have a reporter at meetings during the first five months of the review process but accounts of our meetings based on telephone interviews of commissioners were regularly printed.⁵¹

The index of the Tribune stories for November 1974 through March 1975 lists no stories for that period.

The Tribune reflected public apathy in Great Falls in its frequency of coverage. However, the paper did not take public disinterest as a license for bad writing or biased coverage of the review.

There is little evidence to suggest the Tribune did not keep the public informed when it covered the review. Except for the aforementioned gaps, the paper ran at least one story and often more on the issue almost every month of the review. Most of those stories appeared on the first 10 pages of the paper. Although the Tribune did not separate them from other news stories, they were reasonably

located. Staff writer Leon Lenz generally covered both the city and county review. Although the Tribune failed to keep the public regularly informed about the review, it covered most major events in the issue.

Although the Tribune covered the major events in the process, it failed to analyze the issue sufficiently. The second article in the ASNE's statement says: "Freedom of the press belongs to the people. . . . Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public."⁵²

The Tribune ran no news analyses of the review. One issue in particular should have aroused the paper's curiosity. A July 29, 1970, story said the Cascade Democratic Central Committee had "authorized expending pledge funds for the support of passage of the proposed city charter if it contains two suboptions--a choice between partisan and nonpartisan elections and a choice between an elected mayor and an appointed manager."⁵³ The Tribune made no effort to analyze the ethics of a political party giving funds to a citizens' group if it would do something a certain way. Nor did the paper mention the fact that the study group received half its funding from the state and half from the city. The Tribune was content merely to report the issue and did the public a disservice by failing to see "that the public's business [was] conducted in public." The question remains unanswered of how many other pledges the city group received and from whom.

Article three of the ASNE's principles states: "Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety as well as

any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict."⁵⁴ Here, too, the Tribune failed to live up to its principles. As noted earlier, Carla Beck was a member of the Cascade County Central Committee. Beck wrote stories, albeit unbiased, about the Democratic Committee.

According to James, the Tribune's editors were aware of the situation.

"We didn't think it was altogether healthy, to tell the truth," he said, adding there had been a proposal to remove Beck from the story.⁵⁵ Ironically, the Republican Party asked the Tribune to keep Beck on the beat, stating it felt her coverage was outstanding. While there was no evidence of bias in Beck's coverage, the Tribune still failed to avoid the "appearance of impropriety."

The Tribune did meet article four of the ASNE's principles. The article says "good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly."⁵⁶ The Tribune's news stories always presented both sides of an issue. There were three minor errors in the paper's entire coverage of the issue.

The paper also met the criteria of article five, which states "articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified."⁵⁷ With the exception of Denise Mort's personal interpretations in an Aug. 14, 1975, story, the Tribune's news stories were generally free of opinion or personal interpretation.

Article six of the ASNE's principles says "journalists should

respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news stories."⁵⁸

The Tribune's stories met those criteria.

In addition to 57 news stories, the Tribune also ran 12 editorials about the review, 10 in 1970. The Tribune's editorials, like its news stories, did not always measure up to journalistic standards. Some editorials were based on rumor rather than on fact.

Rule one in the National Conference of Editorial Writers Code states: "The editorial writer should present facts honestly and fully. It is dishonest and unworthy of him to base an editorial on half-truth. He should never consciously mislead a reader, distort a situation or place any person in a false light."⁵⁹

A Jan. 15, 1975, Tribune editorial says:

The fragmented communication that transpired between the study commissioners and some of the audience at the Monday meeting demonstrated how ill-informed the public remains about the merger issue despite extensive publicity efforts. Public participation has been poor. Some area ranchers and conservatives, including reported John Birch Society members, expressed vehement opposition at the last meeting.⁶⁰

The Tribune should not have relied on "reported" information to label audience members. Perhaps area ranchers and conservatives were members of the society, but unless the paper had proof, it should have condemned the individuals' actions only and not labeled them in such a manner.

Rule two of the NCEW code states "The editorial writer should draw objective conclusions from the stated facts, basing them upon the weight of evidence and upon his considered concept of the greatest

good."⁶¹ The Tribune's editorials generally acknowledged the value of opposing opinions and the paper had no trouble meeting the article.

Rule three of the NCEW's code says "The editorial writer should never be motivated by personal interest, nor use his influence to seek special favors for himself or for others."⁶² The Tribune's editorials appear to have been free from personal interest.

The Tribune also met the NCEW's fourth rule, which says "The editorial writer should realize he is not infallible. Therefore, so far as it is within his power, he should give a voice to those who disagree with him--in a public letters column and by other suitable device."⁶³

During the course of the review, the Tribune received one letter on the issue, on May 9, 1976.⁶⁴ Written by former alderwoman Ann Allen, the letter said city residents had been promised they could vote in 1976 on whether to return the mayor-alderman form of government to office. The Tribune had answered this statement in an April 9, 1976, editorial, which said residents had only been promised there would be a chance to vote on the mayor-alderman form, not that there would be a commitment to do so.

The Tribune carried a regular public letters column. In addition, the paper's editorials regularly called for citizen involvement in the review.⁶⁵

The Tribune was also willing to correct its mistakes, in keeping with rule five of the NCEW code, which says "The editorial writer should regularly review his own conclusions in the light of all obtainable information. He should never hesitate to correct them

should he find them to be based on previous misconceptions."⁶⁶

In its April 9, 1970 editorial, the Tribune said it had erred in an editorial which said citizens had the right to vote on whether to return the mayor-alderman form to office in 1970.

Rule six of the NCEW code states:

The editorial writer should have the courage of well-founded conviction and a democratic philosophy of life. He should never write or publish anything that goes against his conscience. Many editorial pages are the products of more than one mind, however, and sound collective judgment can be achieved only through sound individual judgments.⁶⁷

An example of differing editorial viewpoints in the Tribune may be seen from two 1976 editorials. In a Jan. 12 editorial, the Tribune said: "While it may be unrealistic to propose consolidation this year, the pros and cons of consolidation deserve frank discussion."⁶⁸

On Jan. 15, after a proposal for consolidation talks had been defeated by commission members of both the city and county study groups, the Tribune backed down from its earlier statement:

Events at the city and county study commission meeting Monday night demonstrated the idea of a merger of the two governments might be premature. . . . The city study commission is right to attempt to find long-term solutions to local government problems. However, it might be better strategy for them to aim for 1986 than push for merger now.⁶⁹

The Tribune, seeing the direction of public opinion, retreated from suggesting consolidation should be discussed. The second editorial is more in keeping with James' statement that the paper was happy with the existing government. The Tribune, by running its Jan. 15 editorial, seemed to negate the "well-founded conviction" of the Jan. 12 editorial.

The Tribune met rule seven of the code, which states "The editorial writer should support his colleagues in their adherence to the highest standards of professional integrity."⁷⁰ Other than the paper's editorials which quoted rumor, rather than fact, the Tribune did not deviate substantially from the "highest standards of professional integrity."

One final problem was the frequency of the Tribune's editorials. There were only 12 in three years of the review process, 10 of which appeared in 1970. The paper should have carried more editorial comment on the issue in 1974 and 1975.

In summary, the Tribune's coverage of the local-government review was adequate, considering the lack of public interest in the issue. The paper reflected that lack of interest in its coverage, but kept the public informed on the issue in an unbiased and clear manner. What the Tribune's editorials lacked in frequency, they generally made up for in accuracy and fairness. The Tribune's coverage, while not outstanding, was sufficient.

CHAPTER III
THE MISSOULIAN'S COVERAGE
OF LOCAL-GOVERNMENT REVIEW, 1974-1976

Rarely in Missoula's history has an election sparked more interest than the one in 1976. There were several reasons. It was the first presidential election since the Watergate crisis. And Montanans were finding a successor to Sen. Mike Mansfield, the long-time politician who had worked his way up to office from Butte's copper mines.

Missoulians were also interested in the 1976 election for a local reason. It was the year residents decided what type of government their city and county would have. The issue aroused great public interest as residents debated the pros and cons of different forms of government.

Missoula's daily newspaper, the Missoulian, followed the issue from its start in 1972. The state constitution directed the Legislature in that year to provide procedures requiring each local government in the state to study its structure and submit one alternative form to the electors. The intense interest of Missoulians and of the Missoulian in the proceedings can be documented in a study of the paper's coverage of the review.

This study will be divided into three parts. First, the Missoulian's coverage of the review will be chronicled, followed by an analysis of that coverage. The final part will contain criticisms

of the Missoulian's treatment, using the guidelines of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the National Conference of Editorial Writers.

The Missoulian was caught up in the excitement of the review. In February 1974, more than two years before residents voted on an alternative form, the paper stated that "the fact is that 1970 will be a landmark year in Montana local government history. Work will be done that is so important that the state will never be the same again."¹

What effect did the paper's interest in the review process have? An analysis of the Missoulian's coverage of the review answers these and other questions. Rarely have the inner workings of local governments been subjected to such scrutiny as the Missoulian gave to both the existing city and county governments. This scrutiny, as well as its effects, is considered in this analysis.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

The Missoulian took an early and active interest in the review. The first of its 123 stories about the event appeared in February 1974, and the last in November 1970, more than five months after the review proposal had been defeated by voters. In this analysis, the Missoulian's coverage of the review from 1974 to June 1970 is considered.

The Missoulian's first mention of the review came when the Montana Legislature was in session in February 1974. (At that time, the Legislature met on an annual, rather than biennial, basis.) The Legislature was considering bills to "set up and fund a state-

level commission that would study local governments."² The state commission was to make recommendations to the 1975 Legislature on laws dealing with alternate structures for local governments, their finances, powers and the services they performed. The commission also would try to recodify state laws affecting local government. In addition, under a pending house bill, local-government study commissions would be set up by April 15, 1974, and their members would be elected in the November 1974 election.

By April, preparations for the forthcoming state-wide review of local government were well under way. Commissioners from Montana's seven largest counties had decided against establishing uniform standards for the number of persons on county local-government commissions, since several counties had already adopted resolutions establishing specific numbers of review commissioners.

In Missoula, several members of the state commission were explaining the review and emphasizing the role of residents. State commissioners were also explaining that residents wishing to run for election to the city or county review commissions had to file petitions signed by 100 registered voters by Aug. 1.

In addition, the state commission was studying the state's laws relating to local governments and was drawing up legislation to change those laws. Some had been enacted as far back as 1921 and allowed cities and towns to provide for hitching animals on streets and prohibit women from wearing hats in theaters. Because Missoula had changed governments several times since its incorporation in 1883, most of its laws had been regularly overhauled, as new govern-

ments took office. At the time of the review, Missoula had been under a mayor-aldermanic government since 1959. The city had 12 elected council members--two from each ward. A mayor, police judge and treasurer were elected, and day-to-day administration was handled by appointed officials, such as the city engineer and clerk.

Before 1959, Missoula had been under a succession of different types of government. The city had a history of being open to reform, unlike the county which had retained its commissioner government since its inception in 1865. The city had begun with a mayor-aldermanic form in 1883, when the city was incorporated. In 1911, the mayor, a blacksmith, was indicted for shoeing the fire-station horses without calling for bids. An alderman was accused of buying hay for himself to feed the city's horses from his own business. Residents voted to change to a commission form, with a mayor and two council members. The commission form lasted until 1954, when unhappiness with a system that allowed the three city officials to be both policy makers and administrators led residents to change to a commission-manager form. The commission-manager form had five elected commissioners and was marred by interdepartmental disputes. In 1959, the residents replaced it with the mayor-aldermanic system, which was in effect at the time of the review.

Missoula's history of governmental change is unusual in Montana, where most cities retain the same form of government for several decades. Why this should be so is hard to define, but the presence of the University of Montana's political science department may have some influence, since residents have the advantage of being able

to consult experts in the field about various governmental problems. In addition, the university provides Missoula with a forum for a wide variety of opinions. Many people of different viewpoints have been attracted to the city by the university's liberal reputation. These viewpoints are not divided along the traditional political lines of Democrat and Republican, but rather along the philosophical lines of liberal and conservative. Active members of the Missoula Local Government Review Commission characterized themselves along these philosophical lines when they were asked why the review was so popular in Missoula.³ John Toole, current mayor and former city group member, stated that Missoula had always had a liberal city council that was open to new ideas and added that Missoulians regularly elected liberal congressmen to office. Toole also said, however, that many Missoula residents are very conservative and the philosophical differences between conservatives and liberals set the stage for the active debate surrounding the review and the consolidation proposal.

There were other factors as well which contributed to the debate. In an interview on Jan. 8, 1985, Toole mentioned several of those factors, including the fact that, had the city and county consolidated, county taxes would have gone up. In addition, he said, there was an argument about whether the proposed government's administrator would be elected or appointed. Toole said the commission-manager form is not popular in Missoula. The city was under that form from 1954 to 1959 and it had proved unpopular. Thus, the suggestion by the review commission to appoint a manager met with loud arguments for and against it and contributed to public participation in the re-

view.

By July, the review was well under way in Missoula. The Aug. 1 filing deadline for city and county study commission candidates was approaching and 44 persons eventually filed for the 14 study-commission seats. Nineteen had filed for seven seats on the city commission and 26 for the county commission. Two--one from the city and one from the county--were disqualified because they did not have enough signatures of registered voters on their petitions for nomination.

By September, two months before the election of the study commissioners, some groups already were debating what form of government the commissions should recommend for Missoula's city and county. The Interlocal Cooperation Commission suggested the two governments should be unified. The group had been established in 1969 to recommend to the Legislature ways to improve government services between the city and county.

The interlocal commission said city and county services were often duplicated and money would be saved by combining the two. The group also recommended that a combined city-county government should have a charter, which would allow it to exercise all legislative powers not reserved by the state. At that time, local governments had only those powers granted by the state.

The University of Montana also joined the review process in September. Its Bureau of Government Research and the State Commission on Local Government sponsored the first in a state-wide series of review workshops. Prospective government study commissioners,

city and county officials and residents were invited to attend. Among the speakers was Thomas Payne, UM political science professor and member of the state commission, and Jerry Holloran, former assistant director of the state Constitutional Commission staff and UM assistant professor of journalism.

Beginning in October, several discussion forums sponsored by the UM Bureau of Government Research were held in Missoula. The forums dealt with local government and about 100 residents attended an Oct. 3 hearing to debate city and county consolidation. Their interest had been sparked since the city recently had tried unsuccessfully to annex a Rural Fire District because of a restraining order by a district judge, who said a 1973 legislative act prevented the action. The structure of a combined city-county government also was discussed, and one resident expressed fears a combined government would lead to uncontrolled bureaucracy and "blossism."⁴

On Nov. 5, the review commission elections were held and the groups immediately began meeting, not waiting for the first Nov. 20 meeting mandated by the state. Elected to the county group were John Toole, Rebecca Deschamps, Audra Bowman, Elmer Frame, Nancy Orr, Dr. Kit Johnson and Alice Campbell. Members of the city-government study commission were Barbara Evans, Don Weston, Margot Talbot, Paul Crowley, Nancy Allison St. John, Douglas Hanson and Kim Williams.

Both commissions began the review process quickly. By Nov. 27 they had agreed to share staff and office space and had decided against holding regularly scheduled joint meetings. Each group had been allocated \$5,000 from the state for the remaining fiscal year.

The city and county governments had matched the grant, so the groups each had \$10,000 to work with through June 1975.

In December both the city and county groups began talking with government officials to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the existing governments. Larry Heggen, the city administrator, told the city group the city's "weak-mayor" form obscured the differences between the legislative and administrative tasks. He said the city council was not setting policy because it was saddled by administrative duties. He thought the existence of autonomous boards within the government, lack of executive responsibility and lack of coordination between the city council and departments contributed to inefficiency and occasional friction in the government.⁵

Chuck Painter, county director of administrative services, told the county group later in December that any alternative form of government that the group recommended should give "clear-cut central authority to a governing body."⁶

Painter said the question of who had the ultimate responsibility for government action or inaction plagued Missoula's county government and had for years. Painter said state law did not clearly define if the three county commissioners, or elected officials such as the county treasurer, had responsibility for their jobs.

By late December, the groups were progressing. The city group had recommended "home rule" powers for local government and a five-year moratorium on changing the form of government once voters decided in 1976 which alternative to accept. The county group had agreed to recommend a three-year moratorium on changing any new

form of government approved by the voters in 1970.

Members of both groups met with Missoula County legislators in late December to urge support for a series of proposed bills that established guidelines for local-government study commissions. Among the bills were several that described what form local governments could take and their powers.

The study groups had been meeting less than two months when consolidation of the city and county governments was suggested as the answer to the problems of urban Missoula County by Jerry Holloron, the local government researcher at the 1972 Constitutional Convention. At a city study-group meeting early in January 1975, Holloron told the group the city of Missoula had about 30,000 persons within its limits and an almost equal number outside its boundaries. He said people outside the city limits received almost the same services as those in the city but paid lower taxes. Holloron thought the main deterrent to 1970 voter acceptance of a consolidated government could be fear of elected officials in the old government or their appointees of losing their jobs.

Both the city and county groups formed steering committees that were to decide by July 1, 1975, whether to work toward a consolidated government plan.

Both the city and county groups began meeting in the middle of January with Missoula officials to get their views on the existing city and county government.

City Council President Mike Brown told the city group he backed consolidation because it would help eliminate duplication of some

services between the city and county as well as ease the tax burden on city residents who paid both city and county taxes.⁷

Missoula County Sheriff John Moe and former surveyor Elmer Frame told the county study group they wanted the offices of surveyor and sheriff filled by appointment, instead of by election. Moe said he felt a better sheriff could be obtained through appointment and could more easily be removed from office if he proved incompetent. Frame, a member of the county study group, said an appointed surveyor would also be better qualified than one who was elected, since applicants would be required to meet specific qualifications if appointed, while the job would be open to anyone with no experience if it were elective, he said.⁸

During the latter part of January, the results of a random-sample survey done by the University of Montana Department of Political Science found that almost half of the city's registered voters supported some kind of consolidation, and fewer than one-third of the county residents did so. The survey, supervised by Tom Payne, found 71.2 percent of those interviewed found local government to be moderately or very efficient. Only 21.2 percent knew how many study commission members had been elected to the city and county groups and most could not name them.

On Jan. 31, the county study group endorsed legislation to allow voters to authorize sales and income taxes in cities and towns. All five members attending the meeting approved the endorsement. The legislation was to be discussed in early February by legislators.

In February, the first signs of disagreement among commissioners

became evident. On Feb. 12 the city group had approved a motion to begin working with the county study commission to consider city-county consolidation. On Feb. 20 Barbara Evans stated in a letter to the Missoulian that she opposed the motion because she thought the move was not responsive to the desires and interests of residents. She said a study of city departments had not been completed,⁹ and a comparative analysis of the county departments had not been started.

"Until all the facts are in, a decision to work on a unified form of government seems to me to be premature," she said.¹⁰

On Feb. 28 a second letter by Evans was published in the Missoulian. She argued against consolidation, quoting Missoula Fire Department officials who thought consolidation would lead to a "multitude of problems."¹¹

In March Evans' letters drew comments from other city-group members. Three--Margot Talbot, Nancy St. John and Kim Williams--said the letters had not been authorized by the group and the public might believe the letters represented the sentiment of the entire commission. Evans promised to place disclaimers on any subsequent letters to indicate the opinions were hers and not those of the commission.

On March 11 another city commission member, Margot Talbot, also had published in the Missoulian a letter that explained the group's responsibilities and favored studying consolidation but only with the approval of residents.

The argument subsided by April, as the city group continued to study the existing government. On April 8 the group met with eight

former Missoula mayors to hear their comments and recommendation for changes in Missoula's government. Three of the mayors--Ed Schultz, Wes Waldbillig and Walter Cash--said they did not favor consolidation. Instead, they argued that state laws should be changed to allow annexation of urban areas bordering the city.¹²

The county study group met with county officials. In an April 10 meeting, the Missoula County Commissioners told the group the commissioners needed more legislative authority. State law said that the county commissioners could act only as an executive board and that the Legislature was the legislative arm of county government. The commissioners stated the study group could recommend that the commissioners be given legislative powers when it proposed an alternative from to voters in 1976.¹³

In late April the county group met with Tom Payne, member of the state commission. He said he favored writing a charter for the county because he wanted local governments to have more power. He thought a charter should be brief and not a "statute for how garbage should be collected or roads should be paved."¹⁴

On May 8 the county group announced it endorsed a charter form of government. At the same time, the group expressed opinions ranging from cool to warm on consolidation. According to Becki Beschamps, city group member, city and county governments fulfill different needs and should not be consolidated. However, the idea of a confederated government--two governments sharing some or all services--did win the support of some members, Beschamps among them.

By May 19, after long debate, the county group's opinions had been formulated to the point that it agreed to support a unified Missoula city and county government. Deschamps still disagreed, however, saying she thought separate city and county governments better represented the people.

Other members, however, said they favored writing a charter for a new government and the election of a legislative body with not fewer than nine members elected at large and nominated from districts. The group also supported the creation of county community councils to advise the main legislative body.

On May 29, during a joint meeting of the city and county groups, members of both said they supported a consolidated government. They voted to hold a joint meeting June 13 to decide whether the commissions should work together to form an alternative proposal for a consolidated government or work separately.

At the June 13 meeting the groups voted to continue working together and begin writing a charter for an alternative government. However, they delayed their decision on whether to favor consolidation, confederation or some other form of government.

In July the groups began considering problems in proposing an alternative government, including inequity of taxes and duplication of services by the city and county. The groups agreed that any alternative government they proposed should have strong planning powers. The groups also debated whether to include consolidation of city and county government in their proposed charter. Some members said they feared voters would reject a ballot containing both a plan

for a strong charter form and a plan for consolidation.¹⁵

"When we throw in everything we've got at one time, people are going to say 'no,'" said Don Weston, city group member.¹⁶

Weston suggested in a July 17 meeting that a charter for a strong county government be voted on during the spring of 1970. City voters, he added, could vote later on whether to disincorporate the city and come under county government.

On July 31 nine of the 14 members of the city and county groups voted to develop a county charter that would lead to unification of the city and county governments. The groups agreed to follow Weston's suggestion of a county charter-city disincorporation approach "until such time as the city or county study groups vote to adopt a different goal."¹⁷ City member Barbara Evans stated she could support the writing of a county charter that the city group could promote.

By late August the groups were discussing the steps necessary for developing the charter and gaining voter approval for it. Nancy Orr, a county study-group member, told the city council and the county commissioners at an Aug. 18 meeting that the city-county consolidation in other areas had historically improved services, although it had not resulted in lower taxes. Orr said the study commissions had not determined exactly how disincorporation would affect taxes.¹⁸

The groups' two-step plan to consolidated government met some reaction from residents. In an Aug. 25 letter to the Missoulian, Robert McKelvey said the groups should prepare

an honest consolidation plan and take the case for it directly to the voters. / McKelvey argued that county residents would see the plan to first vote on a charter for the county, followed

by a later election to disincorporate the city as a ⁷ sneaky way to set up the machinery for unification, while leaving the vote that will trigger the mechanism in the hands of City residents. Non-city, urban area residents have repeatedly stated their willingness to accept consolidation, but not a forced unification imposed on them unilaterally by the city.¹⁹

On Sept. 1, Paul Crowley, vice chairman of the city group, answered McKelvey's letter, saying the commissions had chosen the two-step plan because it would provide greater flexibility for the city and county. If voters passed the county charter in June, the city would be able to proceed with its plan for a disincorporation proposal. If the charter failed, he said, the city commission would still have time by the November election to propose another alternative form to residents.²⁰

Beginning in September the study groups prepared specific proposals for their charter government. They proposed a county council to replace the Missoula City Council and County Commission. The County Council would comprise 13 members, nine elected from districts and four at large. The Council would appoint its own staff and override the veto of the executive by a two-thirds majority vote. The executive would be elected every four years and would hold veto powers and be responsible for the hiring, firing and supervision of county employees. The executive would appoint a qualified administrative assistant.

The executive officer's position in the proposed combined government met with objection from local residents. At a Sept. 17 public hearing, several people protested that the charter granted too much authority to the executive, specifically in hiring and firing

authority over all personnel. Some said they thought appointment of department heads should be confirmed by the County Council, which would give the legislative branch more power in the operation of the government.²¹

Discussion of the charter continued throughout September, October and November. The study commissions were to issue a revised charter proposal later in the year after hearing residents' complaints and comments concerning the tentative charter. By December it had become evident from several hearings that residents supported a straight consolidation plan which would present a plan for city-county consolidation to the voters in June. Residents did not care for the plan advocated by the study groups, which was to first vote on a charter for the county in June, followed by another election in November to decide on whether to disincorporate the city. At a Dec. 2 hearing, only two persons out of about 50 residents supported the groups' plan. More than 30 told the groups they would prefer to see a straight consolidation proposal to the groups' plan.²²

At the same meeting, several residents argued against an appointed executive who would manage county affairs, saying an elected representative would better represent the people. Members of the two groups became divided over whether to choose a straight consolidation plan or the two-step plan they had originally advocated.

On Dec. 12 a study by Malinda Schaill, UM professor of economics, showed that persons living outside the Missoula city limits received at least \$300,000 in services a year paid by city residents. The study had been commissioned by the city and county study groups.

Schaill said county residents were almost "freeloaders because they get something for nothing."²³

At the end of December the county study group published a tentative draft of the charter for a new combined city-county government. The city and county commissions planned a series of public hearings on the draft to gain public input before writing a final charter for the ballot in June 1976. The charter carried provisions so the county government could assume control of the city if the city government were disincorporated.

The debate between the study groups' proposed plan of first approving a county charter followed by disincorporation of the city continued into January 1976. On Jan. 8 the two groups agreed to delay a vote on the issue on Jan. 29. The county group backed the consolidation approach unanimously, but the city group was divided. A majority of each of the groups was needed to approve either the straight consolidation plan or the charter-disincorporation proposal. In addition, the groups decided to stop holding joint meetings until Jan. 29.

The split between the groups was intensified because several study commissioners had indicated they were dissatisfied with the groups' tentative charter. City member Barbara Evans said she did not believe city residents would benefit from the charter and argued for specific definitions of how different departments in the city and county would be merged or kept separate.²⁴

Evans said she would oppose the charter in its present form because it did not provide specific instructions for the combining

of the city and county law enforcement agencies. She argued that specific instructions were needed to prevent loss of seniority among employees and a duplication of services.

On Jan. 15 the members of the city study commission agreed that most of them supported consolidation. However, they wanted changes in the proposed charter, such as an elected executive, a personnel plan and provisions against consolidation of police and sheriff's departments and city and rural fire departments. On Jan. 20 the city group held a special meeting and voted five to two to recommend consolidation. The opponents were Doug Hansen and Barbara Evans. On Jan. 29 the city and county groups met together and almost unanimously backed a consolidated city and county government proposal.

The vote reversed the groups' two-step plan and replaced it with a direct consolidation proposal. Twelve group members supported the motion, while Barbara Evans cast the only dissenting vote. Another member did not arrive at the meeting early enough to vote.

The group said they decided to proceed with the direct proposal after public sentiment against the two-step plan arose. In addition, questions of legal complications arose, and there was fear the new government might not be eligible to receive all the state money the city and county were receiving. The decision to proceed with a direct consolidation proposal did not delay the groups, since their tentative charter required only minor revisions to adapt it to a consolidated government proposal.

After their decision to present a consolidation proposal to voters, the groups continued to work on it and present it to voters

before May 1. In February the groups decided the new government should have nine council members, six elected by district and three at large.

By March the groups were nearing completion of their alternative form. On March 1 the Missoula City Council authorized an election on June 1 to decide the consolidation issue.

Also in March, the groups agreed to leave the job of restructuring Missoula's fire department and law-enforcement agencies to the new government's legislative council. On March 3 at a public hearing on the proposed government, spokesmen for the city police department urged the study commissions to keep the police and sheriff's departments separate. Several people spoke in favor of a proposal by Barbara Evans for charter sanction of separate police and sheriff's departments. Evans had said the police and sheriff's departments should share facilities such as the jail and dispatch equipment but should retain their own uniforms, types of cars, salaries and pensions. As one policeman said, "It does mean a lot to us what color uniforms we wear and what color cars we drive."²⁵

By the middle of March, after receiving residents' comments, the study groups were beginning to revise their proposed charter. The legislative section of the charter was changed to provide for partisan elections of council members. Before, all elected officials in the proposed charter would have been elected on a nonpartisan basis. "Originally, I was for nonpartisan elections, but now feel involvement of the parties at the local level is a good thing, with the responsibility for qualified candidates resting on endorsement

of the parties," said study commission member Dr. Ait Johnson.²⁶

Another change in the proposed charter provided for an elected executive or an appointed administrator. In the first draft of the charter, an appointed administrator was provided for, but according to Nancy Orr, county group member, there was no clear consensus in Missoula or among the study commission of which option to offer voters, so both were placed on the ballot for voters to decide.

Disagreement among commission members continued into March. In a March 24 letter to the Missoulian, Barbara Evans, who was not identified as a commission member, said consolidating Missoula's city and county law-enforcement agencies would cost taxpayers almost \$81,000 for uniform replacement, salary equalization, automobiles and the clerical personnel's salary equalization. She said the "argument for consolidation is that we will gain more efficiency! Do you really thing [sic] that we can gain \$80,798.94 more efficiency?"²⁷

At the beginning of April, the commission approved their final draft charter. Two members--Barbara Evans and Alice Campbell--said they would oppose the proposed charter, but the 12 other members began holding public hearings on the charter and explaining it to residents.

Under the final proposal, the city and county governments would be combined. A nine-member council would be elected and would act on proposed legislation for the new government. The attorney for the new government would be elected on a nonpartisan basis, but other officers such as the clerk and recorder and head law-enforcement officers would be appointed by the city-county administrator.

and confirmed by the council. The question of whether the administrator would be elected or appointed was left to the voters.

In their announcements that they were opposing the charter, Evans and Campbell said they had different reasons for doing so. Evans did not believe the charter would result in a better form of government. She said the charter would give the city-county executive too much power over employees and that consolidation would not necessarily mean savings for Missoula taxpayers. Alice Campbell had opposed a part of the charter that ended election of county officials such as coroners and the superintendent of schools.

Once the commissioners had approved the charter, they began selling it to the public, or, for Evans and Campbell, trying to convince the public not to buy it.

Throughout April and May, residents debated the merits of the charter. Missoula Mayor Robert Brown opposed it because of the sections dealing with law enforcement and the checks and balances between administrative and legislative officers. He said the proposed charter did not include an executive with veto power over legislation passed by the new council. He also said the charter did not contain any guarantee that city police and sheriff's departments would receive equal training.²⁸

Barbara Evans spent much of her time arguing against consolidation of the city and county law-enforcement agencies. In an April 20 letter to the Missoulian, she said (original in capital letters) "The law enforcement agencies in Missoula should be kept separate but share a facility acceptable to both and share technical services."²⁹

Evans reiterated her earlier argument that it would cost too much to consolidate the agencies.

The study commissioners rallied to the defense of their charter. In an April 28 letter to the Missoulian, Dr. Kit Johnson, a member of the county group, said the charter offered Missoula residents a chance to end bickering between the city and county governments and offered an answer to serious budget problems facing the city. The tax burden was nearing its limit and Johnson said the city might well disincorporate, handing over the tax load to county residents. He argued that the charter offered area residents "a choice which they will not have again for 10 years."³⁰

Evans continued her arguments, stating she also opposed the charter because it would eliminate the residents' right to vote for their officials:

The number of officials elected in both the city and the county total 31. Under the proposed charter each voter would only be allowed to vote for five or six. (If the elected executive suboption passes, the voter would vote for six.) This takes away the right to vote for over two-thirds of the present number.³¹

The debate continued into May. In a May 7 letter to the Missoulian, county group member Elmer Frame said Evans was a member of the Police Commission and a special deputy, and, as such, had not been honest with the voters when she argued against the consolidation of the city-county law-enforcement agencies.

Also in May, a group called "Citizens Against Consolidation" was formed in Missoula. The group circulated a leaflet signed by 23 Missoula residents, including Evans and Mayor Robert Brown. The

leaflets, which carried the group's address as Evans' home, said members of the study commissions had not determined how much their proposed government would cost nor did the charter have provision for protest or stopping special-improvement districts not wanted by residents.

As the June 1 election approached, opponents and proponents of the charter increased their efforts to sway voters. Yet many residents were unaware of the consolidation proposal. In a May 18 story, the Missoulian interviewed 18 persons, eight of whom said they were unaware of the review. Others, however, had strong opinions on the issue, including a Lolo resident, who said "If they consolidate, they-are building a monster," and a Missoulian, who said "I just believe there's a lot of money to be saved in eliminating duplication of service."³²

A second group also appeared in Missoula as the election approached, this one in favor of consolidation. Called "Citizens for Consolidation," it had received about \$2,000 by May 17 for its campaign, while its counterpart, "Citizens Against Consolidation," had raised about \$1,821.³³

Because of the many letters about the charter, the Missoulian set a deadline of noon on May 27 for all letters and local comment concerning the June 1 election. Material arriving by then would, depending on quantity and length, be printed before election day. If too much arrived, the paper said, it might appear on election day or not at all.

On May 28 the results of a thesis by a UM graduate student in

economics were released. Alan Davis contended consolidation would save taxpayers at least \$50,000. Davis had based his research on city and county budgets for fiscal year 1975-76 and interviews with city and county departments heads. His findings differed sharply from those of Barbara Evans, who had said it would cost at least \$80,000 to consolidate the city and county law-enforcement agencies. Davis said Evans made a mistake in her report by attempting to equalize the salaries of ranking officers in the agencies. He said such an increase would not be justified, since some officers had 19 or 20 years' experience, while others had only nine.

The debate continued until June 1, when the Missoulian summed up the issue by saying, "It has all been said. The issues and non-issues, the fears and follies have all been written, read, mashed and mangled. Now it's your turn."³⁴

And voters took their turn. The results were uncertain at first. With the Votamatic totals in from all 60 precincts in the county, the consolidation proposal led 7,144 to 6,863. But the majority of paper ballots opposed the consolidation proposal and it was defeated 10,858 to 8,831.

THE MISSOULIAN'S TREATMENT OF THE REVIEW

The Missoulian began covering the review in February 1974 with the preparations by the state for the election of local-government study commissions.

During the next 29 months, the Missoulian printed 123 stories, 19 editorials and 32 letters about the review and the efforts of the

city and county local-government review commissions--working together --to propose an alternative to the existing governments of Missoula city and county. The paper covered the review regularly.

TABLE 11

MISSOULIAN COVERAGE

<u>Year</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Editorials</u>	<u>Letters</u>	<u>Columns</u>
1974	36	3	0	0
1975	51	7	11	22
1976	36	9	21	0

(Sources for all tables were the indexes to the Missoulian, 1974-76 and are original compilations. It is possible the amounts are smaller than the actual totals printed by the Missoulian, since not all letters or columns may have appeared in the indexes. They are close approximations, however, and are based on all available evidence.)

To determine the Missoulian's role in the review process, the paper's coverage was analyzed. Among the factors studied were the paper's frequency of coverage, bias, errors, editorial content, story placement and use of wire service stories. The paper's coverage is considered by year. Conclusions concerning the coverage are presented before comparison and judgments are made.

1974

Throughout much of 1974, the state and Missoula were busy preparing for the review process. Many of the Missoulian's stories about the review dealt with how it would affect city and county government or were explanations of the review. With such a local angle, almost all of the stories were written by Missoulian writers,

rather than by the Associated Press. (The Missoulian also subscribed to United Press International at the time, but no stories with a UPI byline were found.)

In addition, the paper had a state bureau in Helena, where Arthur Hutchinson reported on many state activities dealing with the review. Most of the Missoulian's editorials, which were signed, were written by Sam Reynolds, editorial page editor. A breakdown of the authorship of the Missoulian's stories may be seen from Table 12.

TABLE 12
AUTHORS OF MISSOULIAN REVIEW STORIES, 1974

<u>Author</u>	<u>Number</u>
Associated Press	2
Staff Writers	24
No byline	11
Editorials	3
Letters	0

The paper mentioned the review regularly in 1974, beginning with an editorial Feb. 25 which introduced the review to readers and asked for their support. During the following months, as the review got under way, the Missoulian's coverage increased, most notably just before the Aug. 1 filing date for local-government review commission candidates and in November and December when the commissioners were elected and began meeting.

TABLE 13

MISSOULIAN COVERAGE BY MONTH, 1974

<u>Month</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Month</u>	<u>Number</u>
February	2	July	11
March	0	August	3
April	3	September	5
May	2	October	1
June	1	November	3
		December	0

The Missoulian printed three editorials in 1974, beginning with its February 25 introduction to the review. The second, on July 11, dealt with petitions being circulated by candidates for the review commissions. The third, on September 16, dealt with a decision by the Missoula Interlocal Cooperation Commission to recommend a unified local government.

From the beginning of the review, the Missoulian advocated a change in city and county government, preferably consolidation. But the paper kept its views on the editorial page. Even when the paper clashed with its sources, as it did July 25 when the Missoula County Clerk and Recorder's Office refused to identify candidates for the county study commission until the signatures on their petitions had been verified, the paper's coverage remained unbiased, as may be seen from its story on the incident:

The Missoulian was attempting to list the candidates--and note that their signatures remained unchecked--so others interested in running for the commission would know who else had filed. The filing deadline is Aug. 1.

. . . In the meantime, candidates who have turned in signature petitions are asked to fill out a biographical form at The Missoulian so the newspaper may report who is running for the positions.³⁵

There was only one error in the Missoulian's 1974 coverage. This occurred in staff writer Charles Johnson's July 5 story which said "Few persons have filed to run for commission seats in the 56 counties and 64 incorporated cities and towns where studies will be conducted" ³⁶ There were 126 municipalities in Montana at that time, not 120 as Johnson's story suggested, and the Constitution mandated all of them should review their local governments.

The Missoulian's stories about the review usually appeared on pages one through 10. The paper's editorials appeared on page four. review stories were often placed on the community page.

TABLE 14
PLACEMENT OF 1974 MISSOULIAN STORIES

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Editorials</u>
1-5	19	3
6-10	11	
11-15	4	
16-20	0	
21-25	1	
supplement	1	

1975

Almost all of the Missoulian's 51 stories and seven editorials in 1975 dealt with efforts of the study groups to decide which

alternative government to recommend to voters in June, 1970. All the stories were by staff writers:

TABLE 15
AUTHORS OF 1975 MISSOULIAN STORIES

<u>Author</u>	<u>Number</u>
Associated Press	0
Staff Writers	42
No byline	9
Editorials	7
Columns	22
Letters	11

The Missoulian covered the review regularly throughout 1975. The city and county groups spent much of their time debating the merits of consolidation. City-group member Barbara Evans was responsible for a large number of letters to the editor about the review, because she used the Missoulian's letter column to inform the public about her opinions of the group's alternative proposal. Other group members then used the column to respond to Evans' comments. Both residents and group members made frequent use of the letters column, as may be seen from table 10.

The Missoulian's coverage peaked in January, April and December. This was because the study groups had just started their work in January and the issue was new to the community. In April, the city and county groups met with local-government officials to hear their viewpoints about the review. Those meetings, especially the one on

April 8 with eight former mayors of Missoula, received a lot of attention. In December, the groups released a tentative charter advocating disincorporation of the city and a charter for the county. That development also received much coverage by the Missoulian.

TABLE 10
1975 COVERAGE BY MONTH

<u>Month</u>	<u>Letters</u>	<u>Editorials</u>	<u>Columns</u>	<u>Stories</u>
January	0	0	1	9
February	2	1	3	1
March	3	0	4	2
April	0	0	4	7
May	1	2	4	4
June	0	0	0	2
July	0	0	3	5
August	1	1	1	4
September	2	0	1	6
October	0	0	0	2
November	1	0	0	1
December	1	3	0	8

There were no errors in the Missoulian's 1975 coverage. Nor was there bias. However, an editorial written by staff writer Steve Shirley on Aug. 20 said the county-study group should present an alternative to voters that "has nothing to hide."³⁷ It said:

. . . Simply bestowing self-government powers to the county will not dispel another major drawback of county government: that decision making is done by a very few persons, usually without the knowledge of the public.

Mr. Mit Johnson, the chairman of the study commissions, noted in critique [sic] of county government that it presently "tends to repress citizen responsiveness."³⁸

The problem with Shirley's criticism was that he was also the reporter assigned to cover the study commissions. As such, it was necessary for him to remain as objective as possible. He should have avoided any display of his opinions.

The Missoulian's seven editorials in 1975 were spaced throughout the year, although three appeared in December when the commissions released their tentative proposal. The Missoulian generally supported the commissions' efforts, as may be seen from Reynold's Dec. 5 editorial:

The Local Government Study Commissions have come up with a tentative draft charter that, whatever its specific faults, would furnish Missoula with a workable, functioning government. The present draft will be changed. But even if it remains unchanged, it could still do the job.

But no charter can be a permanent thing. Unification of city and county, if achieved, will be permanent. Unifying these governments is the paramount issue. The charter's content is secondary, and should not become the means by which unification is nit-picked to death.³⁹

The Missoulian's story placement, as in 1974, was mainly concentrated on pages one through five, although many stories appeared in the community section, usually placed on pages six through 10. Editorials usually appeared on page four.

One feature of the Missoulian's 1975 coverage not repeated in 1974 or 1976 was a series of columns written by members of the city and county study commissions. The columns, entitled "The Spirit of '76," answered questions about the review and explained the commissions' actions and goals. The commissioners had asked the Missoulian to print the columns, which it did from January to September, as can be seen from table 17.⁴⁰

TABLE 17

MISSOULIAN STORY PLACEMENT, 1975

<u>Pages</u>	<u>Letters</u>	<u>Editorials</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Columns</u>
1-5	9	7	35	8
6-10	1	0	9	0
11-15	0	0	1	5
16-20	0	0	5	1
21-25	0	0	0	0
26-30	0	0	0	0
31-40	0	0	1	2

1976

The Missoulian carried 30 stories on the review from January to June, 1976. The most editorials to appear in one month about the review were printed in May. The paper received so many letters about the review before June 1--the day of the election--that it set a deadline of May 27 for all comment.

There were no errors in the Missoulian's 1976 stories about the review. However, there was a technical error in an April 28 editorial. It said:

It ~~/the charter/~~ would change government here. The change would be fundamental and once made could not be unmade.⁴¹

~~/The~~ Missoulian caught the error and said in a May 3 editorial:

Two sentences in last Wednesday's editorial about the proposed Missoula city-county charter created concern. . . . That statement is technically untrue, but in a practical sense true.

If Missoula County voters on June 1 approve the charter, they will start in motion the process of consolidating the present city and county governments. When that process is

completed, the city's present mayor-council government will be gone. So will the county's commission system.

. . . So yes, the government established if this charter passes will itself be reviewed 10 years from now. It is not set in concrete. It can be "unmade" either through initiative or through the next local government review.

The point of the words "The charter would be fundamental and once made could not be unmade" is that once consolidation occurred and the two Humpty Dumpty governments we have are pushed over, it would be wellnigh impossible to put them back together in the way they are now.

. . . So in a practical sense the charter will make fundamental change. That change will itself be endlessly alterable, but once change occurs there will be no turning back.⁴²

With one exception, the Missoulian's stories dealt with the city and county reviews and were written by staff writers.

TABLE 18

AUTHORS OF 1976 MISSOULIAN COVERAGE

<u>Author</u>	<u>Number</u>
Staff writers	26
No outline	9
Editorials	9
Letters	21
Associated Press	1

As in other years, the Missoulian's review stories appeared mainly on pages one through five and its editorials on page four. (See Table 19.)

From February 1974 to June 1976, the Missoulian's review stories contained two errors. There was no bias in its coverage. The Missoulian printed 19 editorials about the review--three in 1974, seven in 1975 and nine in 1976. It ran 123 stories about the review,

120 by staff writers. The paper also printed 32 letters and 22 columns about the review. More than half its stories--72--were placed on pages one through five. Staff writer Steve Shirley wrote most of the Missoulian's stories--57. Other staff writers who covered the review included Sharon Barrett, Carol Van Valkenburg and John Stromnes.

TABLE 19

PLACEMENT OF 1976 MISSOULIAN STORIES

<u>Page</u>	<u>Stories</u>	<u>Editorials</u>	<u>Letters</u>
1-5	20	9	20
6-10	9	0	1
11-15	4	0	0
16-20	3	0	0

CRITICISMS OF THE TREATMENT OF THE REVIEW
BY THE MISSOULIAN

The Missoulian reported the review from its beginning in 1974.⁴³ How thoroughly the paper let the public know what was going on may best be judged through an analysis of the Missoulian's news stories and editorials, using the standards set forth in chapter one.

The Missoulian printed 123 news stories about the review from 1974 to 1977. The first article in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles says that "the primary purpose of gathering and distributing the news is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time."⁴⁴

The Missoulian covered the review extensively, beginning nine months before the study commissions were elected and ending late in 1978, several months after the June 1 election.

The paper's news stories contained one error in that time. It carried 22 columns by study commisssioners dealing with all aspects of the review and its effects on the Missoula area. The Missoulian printed 19 editorials during the review, most supporting the process. Almost all of the paper's news stories, editorials and columns appeared on the first 10 pages. The paper's frequent and accurate coverage was more than adequate to inform the public and enable it to make "judgments on the issues."

Members of the study commissions generally looked favorable on the Missoulian's coverage, although they did have some complaints. John Toole said his impression of the coverage was "that they covered it well."⁴⁵ He said he had no "recollection of being frustrated by lack of media coverage. They gave us all the news we could expect to get."⁴⁶

Both Toole and Barbara Evans, who opposed the consolidation proposal, said the Missoulian's coverage was overwhelming at times. Toole said the paper gave Evans and her fellow consolidation opponent, Alice Campbell, a "disproportionate amount of space"⁴⁷ to present the opposition's side. Toole said, however, that his opinion was "prejudiced."⁴⁸ Evans, unlike Toole, complained all the Missoulian's editorials favored consolidation. She said she did not recall any instances of the paper's opinion appearing in its stories, however.

The Missoulian's frequent coverage of the review had one un-

expected result. Both Toole and Evans said they felt residents became bored with the paper's frequent stories and didn't bother to read them. Apparently the Missoulian's frequent stories did not bore the public completely, however, since the review continued to be, in Toole's words, a "hot potato" in Missoula.⁴⁹

The Missoulian was not content merely to report on the hot potato. It also analyzed the issue and was alert for any sign of wrongdoing on the part of the government or the review commissions.

The second article of the ASNE's principles states: "Freedom of the press belongs to the people. . . . Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public."⁵⁰

On Aug. 20, 1975, the Missoulian printed an editorial by Steve Shirley headlined "County Government Charter Has Nothing to Hide." Shirley's editorial indicates the Missoulian's determination to "see that the public's business is conducted in public." The editorial says:

Some of the public hearings the county commissioners have held have been criticized as nothing more than window dressing. Following a recent hearing, an exasperated woman said she had the impression the commissioners were saying: "Don't confuse us with the facts; our minds are made up." . . . Above all, the county government proposed next spring must prove to voters that it has nothing to hide and nowhere to hide it.⁵¹

Ironically, it was the same editorial that illustrates the Missoulian's compliance with rule two of the ASNE's guidelines that illustrates its non-compliance with article three, which states:

"Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety."

as well as any conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict."⁵²

By writing an editorial stating his opinion on the issue he was supposed to cover objectively, Shirley was unable to avoid an appearance of impropriety. Reporters should avoid stating opinions on issues they must cover, since their readers, especially those who disagree with the opinion, will often find bias in the reporter's stories from then on, whether the stories are biased or not.

The Missoulian met article four of the APOL's principles, which states: ". . . good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and that all sides are presented fairly." The Missoulian's news stories presented both sides of an issue and only one error occurred in the paper's news stories during its coverage of the review.

The Missoulian also met the criteria of article five, which states: "Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified."⁵⁴ The Missoulian carried several news analyses by Shirley, all of which were clearly labeled as such. Shirley's analyses were thoughtful and presented both sides of the review issues, as may be seen from one printed June 3, 1970:

Missoula County voters were following a statewide trend Tuesday when they rejected a proposal to consolidate their city and county governments.

Across the state, 12 of 16 city and county reorganization plans were turned down by voters. Yet the Missoula County contest was much closer than most.

Over all, opponents of local government reorganization in the state outpolled reorganization supporters by a 3-to-1 margin.

But in this county, supporters of the merging of the city and county mustered 45.5 per cent of the vote.⁵⁵

Article six of the ADWA's principles states: "Journalists should respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news reports."⁵⁶ The Missoulian met that standard.

The Missoulian printed 19 editorials on the review. Like its news stories, the Missoulian's editorials were factual and thoughtful. Seventeen of the editorials were written by Sam Reynolds.

Reynolds said the Missoulian's editorial policy was to bring local government as close to the people as possible. The editorials lobbied for "as effective a government as possible," he said, adding he was satisfied with the paper's editorial coverage of the review.⁵⁷

Reynolds said he had never been able to measure what effect his editorials had on the voters' decision to defeat the consolidation proposal. He thought some readers would "vote against anything with my name on it." He compared editorial writing and endorsements to "shooting fish in a barrel," explaining that he was bound to shoot something that residents agreed with.⁵⁸ Evans agreed with Reynolds' statement, saying there are some Missoulians who are against anything Reynolds favors.⁵⁹

Reynolds' attitude toward local-government review is almost militant. Throughout the 1974-76 review, he called for a change in the existing form of city government, saying the city is "hemmed in,"⁶⁰ since it cannot annex land to increase its tax base. County residents enjoy the benefits of city life without paying for them, he said.

Reynolds' editorials reflect the strong opinions held by the

review commissioners. Most commission members were fairly liberal and could be classified as Democrats, although Toole said the group was non-partisan and split along philosophical, rather than partisan, lines. Evans represented the minority opinion of the group--arguably conservative and Republican. Neither Toole nor Evans said political parties per se were the cause of disputes among members. Instead, both said disputes were caused by basic differences in how commission members felt Missoula's government should be run.

The Missoulian's coverage reflected this. There was no mention of political parties in its coverage of the review commission. Judging from the paper's coverage and from Toole's and Evans' comments, the entire review was remarkably apolitical in Missoula.

Instead, other factors influenced voters' decisions to defeat the consolidation proposal. Evans said many residents did not want a detailed proposal that basically told them what kind of tree to plant in their yards. "People are smart enough to know what they want to do," she said.⁶¹ In addition, Evans said the commissions had done almost no studies of how much it would cost to consolidate the city and county governments. Evans said county residents were unwilling to approve the proposal since it might result in an increase in taxes.⁶²

Reynolds' editorials were lively and strongly written. They met the criteria of the first rule of the code established by the National Conference of Editorial Writers: "The editorial writer should present facts honestly and fully. It is dishonest and unworthy of him to base an editorial on half-truth. He should never consciously

mislead a reader, distort a situation or place any person in a false light."⁶³

The second rule of the code states: "The editorial writer should draw objective conclusions from the stated facts, basing them upon the weight of evidence and upon his considered concept of the greatest good."⁶⁴

Although Reynolds' editorials were ardently pro-consolidation, they were not vitriolic. He tried hard to base them on the evidence available, and on his concept of the greatest good. This is illustrated by a May 28, 1976, editorial:

On Tuesday Missoula city and county residents can vote their fears of this new proposal and snuggle in the familiarity of their present lumpy governments, which aren't satisfactory but at least poke citizens in accustomed places.

Or they can vote for the charter--a document which has the disadvantage of not quite satisfying everyone but the advantage of offering Missoulians a chance to govern themselves better than they are able to do today.

This is "our" charter; ours in every sense of the word. Our elected commissioners made it with a process that sought and used citizens' ideas. The charter clearly fixes responsibility --and power--to govern local affairs on the local citizenry. That is its greatest achievement and why it deserves backing by the voters.⁶⁵

The Missoulian's editorials were free of personal interest, in keeping with rule three of the code, which says: "The editorial writer should never be motivated by personal interest, nor use his influence to seek special favors for himself or for others."⁶⁶

Tom Brown, publisher of the Missoulian, contributed \$25 to the consolidation effort, but Reynolds said Brown's contribution or attitude toward consolidation did not influence his editorials.⁶⁷

"That's not the way things operate around here," Reynolds said, adding Brown put no pressure on him to support consolidation.⁶⁸

The Missoulian also met the NCEW's fourth rule: "The editorial writer should realize he is not infallible. Therefore, so far as it is within his power, he should give a voice to those who disagree with him--in a public letters column and by other suitable devices."⁶⁹

During the review, the Missoulian ran 32 letters. Reynolds said he made no attempt to solicit any of them.

"It was purely voluntary," he said, adding he also made no attempt to run more letters for or against consolidation or to balance the editorial page in any way.⁷⁰

City commission member Barbara Evans used the Missoulian's letters column to convey her views about the review to the public. Other members of the city and county commissions answered Evans in the Missoulian's column, providing readers with a lively and sometimes bitter look at the review.

The Missoulian also corrected any mistakes in editorials, in keeping with rule five of the code: "The editorial writer should regularly review his own conclusions in the light of all obtainable information. He should never hesitate to correct them should he find them to be based on previous misconceptions."⁷¹ The Missoulian corrected a statement in an April 28, 1976, editorial, as has been noted earlier.

There is no evidence the Missoulian deviated from rules six or seven of the code, quoted in chapter one.

The Missoulian editorials usually appeared during major events in the review, such as the commissions' decision in February 1976 to abandon their two-step plan of the county's adoption of a charter

followed by the city's reincorporation for a direct consolidation proposal. The Missoulian noted the event, saying the commissions' decision was "wise."⁷² The Missoulian's coverage of the review was outstanding. Its news stories, with one exception, were without error. Its editorials were firm, timely and frequent. The newspaper covered the review regularly and placed stories where they would be seen, often on the first five pages. The Missoulian also served as a forum for public opinion through its letters.

The Missoulian's record speaks for itself: it covered the process superbly and informed and educated the public about the review.

CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS OF THE MISSOULIAN'S AND TRIBUNE'S ROLES
IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW PROCESS

Although Great Falls and Missoula underwent local government reviews from 1974 to 1976, the Great Falls Tribune and the Missoulian covered the event differently.

To compare the papers' coverage and analyze their roles in the review, several factors must be considered: frequency of coverage, bias, errors, story placement and the use of wire-service stories. The papers' coverage is considered by year. General comparison concerning the papers' total coverage are presented before judgments are made. The guidelines of both the ASNE and the NCEW will be used when making any judgments.

The Tribune and the Missoulian began covering the review at about the same time. The Tribune's first story was in March 1974; the Missoulian's was in February 1974. Because the review was mandated by the state, both cities had to meet state deadlines in establishing a city-review commission by Nov. 6, 1974, studying existing local governments and proposing an alternative plan to the voters by Nov. 1, 1976. Great Falls followed the state's deadlines closely, while the Missoula commissions submitted their tentative proposals in January 1976 and presented their final alternatives to voters in June 1976.

Although both cities complied with the deadlines, that was about the only similarity in their reviews.

In Great Falls, residents had undergone a bitterly fought change in government in 1972. The state's mandate to review its new government and propose yet another change met with disinterest. Residents rarely attended the city group's meetings, although the area media did cover the issue occasionally. Both the Tribune and residents felt the new government had not been in place long enough for the public to decide whether it had done a creditable job. Even when the Democrats and labor leaders in Great Falls supported the study group's alternative, the proposal was defeated. This leads to the conclusion that residents were satisfied with their post-1972 government and did not wish to make any changes. Great Falls historically has been a city that resists changes--it kept the mayor-council form until 1972--for 80 years. Only when the city government's actions became so odious to the public did they decide a change was needed. This is noteworthy; considering Great Falls is generally a Democratic, pro-labor town. The answer may be found in the fact that the Democrats and labor leaders only withdrew their support from the pre-1972 government when the city's economic situation became increasingly serious. It seems that so long as the city government protected the labor and political interests in the city from economic mishap, residents were content to retain the existing government. Great Falls' economic situation improved during the 1974-76 review because of federal revenue sharing. Although both Democratic and labor leaders say they saw room for improvement in the new government, residents were generally satisfied with their government and refused to make

any more changes in it. Because of this attitude, the state-mandated review was doomed from the start in Great Falls. The Tribune, correctly seeing that few residents were interested in the review, did not place a high news value on it. Thus, the issue was often relegated to inside pages and not covered with strict regularity.

The Tribune's coverage of the review was different from that of the Missoulian. Community response to the review in Missoula was the opposite of what it was in Great Falls. Missoula has historically been a city that is open to governmental change and had only had its mayor-council form since 1959. The presence of the University of Montana--a liberal arts college--has attracted students from many different areas and has contributed to Missoula's wide spectrum of political viewpoints. In addition, the city has been troubled by problems arising from its relationship with the county for at least two decades. Missoula city residents bear the cost of city taxes while Missoula County residents are able to enjoy city amenities without paying for them. This situation has led to friction in the past between city and county residents and was a major issue in the 1974-75 review. In addition, Missoula's review was less political than that of Great Falls. Members of the city and county study commissions said the differences they encountered were philosophical ones to do with how they felt the city should be run, and not political attitudes.

The Missoulian's coverage also differed from that of the Tribune in editorial stance. The Tribune, with James as editor, was content with the city government and did not advocate any change in it. At

the Missoulian, Reynolds was almost militant in his call for consolidation of the city and county governments. The Missoulian took an early and active stance on the review. Reynolds, who often expresses liberal views, did not call for consolidation because he felt individual members of the city and county governments were doing a bad job, but rather because he felt the structures of the governments promoted inefficiency and unfair tax burdens on city residents. His stance was prompted by what he felt was the best course for the city and the county, and he did not label his views as Republican or Democrat at any time during the course of the review.

Thus, because of the various issues surrounding the reviews in Great Falls and Missoula, the Tribune and the Missoulian covered the process differently. These factors must be taken into consideration when any comparison or judgment of the papers is made.

From March 1974 to November 1974, the Tribune printed 69 stories, editorials and letters about the process and the efforts of the city local-government study commission to propose an alternative to the city's existing government. From February 1974 to June 1974, the Missoulian printed 194 stories, editorials, letters and columns on the review.

1974

Throughout the year, the state and cities were busy preparing for the review in 1974. All 18 stories and the one editorial run by the Tribune that year dealt with preparations for the process, rather than the review itself. The Missoulian's 1974 review coverage focused

on how the review would affect the city and county governments. The Missoulian ran 30 stories on the review and three editorials.

Because most of the Tribune's 1974 stories dealt with the efforts of the Montana Commission on Local Government to inform readers about the state-wide review, eight of the Tribune's stories were by the Associated Press, while 10 were by staff writers or had no byline. The Missoulian maintained a state bureau in Helena, so many of its stories dealing with the state commission were written by staff writers in Helena. Twenty-three of the Missoulian's stories were written by staff members, 11 had no bylines and two were by the Associated Press.

The Tribune ran its largest number of stories in July, just before the filing deadline for review commission candidates. The Missoulian's coverage also peaked in July and again in November and December with the election of review commissions and the beginning of the review.

The Tribune's coverage contained three errors, all minor, in its 1974 coverage, while the Missoulian had one. Neither paper had any instances of bias.

Both papers placed most of their 1974 stories on the first 10 pages, although the Missoulian placed more--19--on pages one through five than did the Tribune, which had three. The Missoulian's editorials appeared on page four, while the Tribune did not have a regular page for its editorials. Its sole 1974 editorial appeared on page six.

1975

The Tribune ran 13 stories and one editorial about the review in 1975. The Missoulian printed 51 stories, seven editorials, 22 columns and 11 letters.

The review was well under way in both cities as review commissions studied existing local governments and began to consider alternatives. Because of the local angle, both papers relied almost exclusively on staff writers to report the issue. Only two of the Tribune's stories were by the Associated Press, while the Missoulian relied totally on staff writers.

There were no errors in the papers' 1975 coverage, nor was there evidence of bias. The Tribune's coverage peaked in November during the height of disagreement between commission members on which alternative to recommend to voters. The Missoulian's coverage peaked in January, April and December because the study groups had just started work in January, and the issue was still new to the community. In April the city and county met with local-government officials to get their viewpoints about the review. In December the groups released a tentative charter for the county.

The Tribune's only editorial appeared Nov. 3. It was a guest editorial by Dale Harris, director of the State Commission on Local Government. The Missoulian's seven editorials were spaced throughout the year, although three appeared in December when the city and county commissions released their tentative alternative.

The Tribune spread its 1975 review coverage throughout the paper,

although most stories appeared on pages six through 10. The Missoulian's stories appeared mainly on pages one through five, as did letters, editorials and columns.

1976

As the review neared completion, the Tribune and the Missoulian increased their coverage of it. The Tribune carried 36 stories, letters and editorials, while the Missoulian carried 71. The Missoulian carried one Associated Press story, while the Tribune relied on staff writers.

Because Great Falls did not vote on an alternative form until November, the Tribune's coverage is more spread out than that of the Missoulian, since Missoula residents decided the issue in June. The Tribune's coverage peaked in January with the question of city-county consolidations. It printed an average of two stories each month through November. The Missoulian's coverage peaked in May just before the election.

There were no errors or bias in the Tribune's or the Missoulian's 1976 stories. The Missoulian did have a technical error in an April 28 editorial, which was corrected in a May 3 editorial.

The Tribune ran 10 editorials about the review in 1976, spread throughout the year. The Missoulian ran nine from January to June, seven in May and in June.

The Tribune ran most of its news stories on pages six through 10, while the Missoulian placed most on pages one through five. Eight of the Tribune's editorials appeared on pages six through 10,

while all of the Missoulian's editorials were on page four.

There were few similarities between the reviews. The Great Falls issue was low-key, while Missoula's was extremely active.

CONCLUSIONS

The Great Falls Tribune and the Missoulian coverage was sufficient for their communities and accurately reflected community interest in the reviews.

According to their editors, it was the goal of the papers to educate the public and keep it informed about the review. The papers were able to do this--the Tribune with a minimum effort, the Missoulian with a maximum one.

The Tribune's coverage of the review was "bare bones." There were two major gaps in its coverage, from November 1974 to August 1975 and from August to November of 1974. Both periods were important to the review process.

The review commission was elected in November 1974 and began working immediately. It finished its study in September 1975 and published its final alternative proposal. Because of those gaps, the Tribune failed to meet the first article in the American Society of Newspaper Editors statement, which says "the primary purpose of gathering and distributing news and opinion is to serve the general welfare by informing the people and enabling them to make judgments on the issues of the time."¹

The Missoulian covered the review extensively, beginning nine months before the study commissioners were elected and ending in

November 1975, five months after the June 1 election. The Tribune attributed its gaps to staff vacations or illnesses. The gaps should not have occurred. The Tribune's coverage was lacking in regularity, but not to the point that it failed to inform the public of major issues or events in the review. Its fault was in its failure to keep the public informed on a weekly basis (the city group met weekly) of the events in the review. However, the paper did cover the major issues. While far from the Missoulian's almost overzealous record, the Tribune did do the minimum necessary to educate the public and keep it informed of the review. Considering the amount of public apathy in Great Falls toward the review, the Tribune's record is not surprising.

The Missoulian chronicled every event in the city/county review. When 44 people filed for review commission seats in August 1974, the Missoulian carried biographies of the candidates. The Tribune ignored the issue after warning residents in July of the approaching Aug. 1 deadline to file for the seats. The Tribune did not mention who was running for the commissions or who was elected.

The Missoulian and the Tribune both met the ASNE's article two: "Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public."² The Missoulian carried an Aug. 20, 1975, editorial that urged the county commissioners to listen to residents' opinions and to make fewer judgments based solely on their own opinions. The Tribune carried no such editorials or analyses, but there is no evidence any was needed.

Both papers failed to live up to article three of the ASNE's

principles: "Journalists must avoid impropriety and the appearance of impropriety. . . ."3 Tribune staff writer Carla Beck was a member of the Cascade County Democratic Central Committee and wrote stories about the committee and the city review commission. Missoulian staff writer Steve Shirley wrote an ill-advised editorial.

Both the Missoulian and the Tribune complied with the remaining three articles of the ASNE's guidelines.

Both papers discussed the review in editorials; the Tribune with 12 and the Missoulian with 19.

Both papers ran editorials about the review during major events in the process. In 1974, the Tribune had one and the Missoulian three. In 1975, the Tribune had one and the Missoulian seven. In 1976, the Tribune had 10, the Missoulian nine.

The Tribune's editorial coverage of the review was generally equal to that of the Missoulian, not so much in quantity but in quality. The Missoulian and the Tribune met the criteria of all but one of the NCEW's guidelines.

The editors of both papers said they had definite editorial stances concerning the review. William James, editor of the Tribune, supported Great Falls' existing government, while Sam Lenoles, editorial page editor of the Missoulian, favored a change in Missoula government. Neither editor said he solicited material for the editorial page. During the review, the Tribune ran only one letter about the issue, while the Missoulian ran 31. This is a reflection not of the papers' coverage but rather of public interest in the review.

The Tribune complained editorially throughout the review of public apathy, while the Missoulian had to set a deadline for letters before the June 1, 1976, election.

Public interest influenced the papers' coverage of the review. In Great Falls, where residents had elected a new form of government to office less than two years before, interest in the review was low. The situation was the opposite in Missoula, where residents seemed eager to at least consider a change in government.

In addition, the activities of the review commissions influenced the papers' coverage. In Great Falls, the city commission worked quietly for almost a year before dissent among the group made the issue more newsworthy. The Tribune often failed to cover commission meetings since there was little going on and little public interest in the review.

In Missoula, however, the question of city-county consolidation, coupled with disagreement among commission members and public interest, made the review extremely newsworthy. Given the city's history of being open to changes in government, it is not surprising that the Missoulian carried far more stories than the Tribune did.

The review coverage by both papers was accurate and unbiased. The Missoulian placed its stories more prominently than did the Tribune, but this may be attributed to how newsworthy the issue was considered to be in the two communities.

Both the Tribune and the Missoulian generally covered the issue fully, given the differing community circumstances and the importance placed on the review by residents. The Missoulian, by relying less

on wire stories and with its more frequent coverage, both editorially and in news stories did a more thorough job of informing the public. The Tribune, with its low-key, bare-bones approach to the issue, nevertheless provided residents with news of the major events in the review and informed them of the process itself. Thus, given the differences in the cities, both the Tribune's and the Missoulian's coverage were sufficient to inform the public about the review.

In general the papers served as educators of the public, informing it of the reasons for the review, explaining how it would affect local government and what part the public would play in it.

From an analysis of the Tribune's and the Missoulian's role in the review, it may be concluded that the press in Montana served as a means of educating the public about the review. There is little evidence the Tribune or the Missoulian's editorials or stories swayed community decisions on the review to a great degree. Instead, residents' decisions seem to have been based on other factors, including taxes, contentment with existing local governments and the actions of the study commissions. There is no instance in either the Tribune or the Missoulian coverage of the review where residents responded directly to an editorial or news story. Instead, letters and stories in both papers are concerned with the issue and not with the papers' coverage of the issue. Nor were there any complaints by residents or study commissioners that the papers' coverage was inadequate or unfair.

The press played an important role in the review process in Great Falls and Missoula, serving as a means of educating the public.

Both papers devoted a large amount of space to the review and endeavored to keep residents informed. Without such coverage, including copies of the alternatives proposed by the study groups, which were published in both papers, it seems certain the review process would have suffered even more from public apathy and ignorance.

By covering the review locally, the Montana press, including the Tribune and the Missoulian, turned the state's mandate into a localized event that affected residents personally. The papers' coverage was generally adequate and unbiased, and in the words of Sam Reynolds:

Even if, after all the work and words, the voters decide to keep their existing forms of local government, the review will have been worth it. The public will have become better educated about local government and lessons about what local people are willing to do will have been learned.⁴

The press served as the public's informer and its barometer. It made few mistakes while doing so and in general gave an accurate and balanced account of the review. By doing so, the press helped the state carry out the review and contributed to the public's knowledge of and expertise in local government.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER 1

- ¹Constitution of the State of Montana, as adopted by the Constitutional Convention, March 22, 1972, and as Ratified by the People June 6, 1972. As Amended. Published by Authority of Jim Waltermire, Secretary of State, Helena, Montana, Article XI, Section 9.
- ²Interview with Thomas Payne, University of Montana professor of political science, Missoula, Montana, Dec. 5, 1984.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴"The Spirit of '70," by John Doole, Missoula County Local Government Study Commission, Missoulian, May 25, 1975, p. 9.
- ⁵Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles, adopted 1975.
- ⁶George L. Bird and Frederic E. Herwin, eds., The Press and Society, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice Hall Inc., 1957), pp. 591-592.

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- ¹"Temporary Committee Created," Great Falls Tribune, March 18, 1974, p. 3.
- ²"Government study still puzzles cities," Great Falls Tribune, Sept. 12, 1974, p. 12.
- ³Picture, Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 8, 1974, p. 12.
- ⁴Lopach, James and Eagle, Robert, Changing Governments in Great Falls: Transition Amid Dissent, Occasional Papers in Local Government No. 5, Bureau of Government Research, University of Montana, June, 1975, p. 3.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 3.
- ⁶Picture, Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 8, 1974, p. 12.

- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "City government study panelists disagree on alternative to suggest," Great Falls Tribune, Aug. 14, 1975, p. 20.
- 9 "Mayor says consider city-county consolidation," Great Falls Tribune, Sept. 18, 1975, p. 28.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 "Conklin presents views on government," Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 10, 1975, p. 8.
- 12 "Local government review," Great Falls Tribune, Nov. 3, 1975, p. 4.
- 13 "Alternate city government recommendation in limbo," Great Falls Tribune, Nov. 5, 1975, p. 8.
- 14 "Government studies' views vary on city executive arm," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 12, 1976, p. 1.
- 15 "City-county consolidation ideas to be heard tonight," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 12, 1976, p. 1.
- 16 Lopach and Eagle, Changing Governments, p. 10.
- 17 "City-county consolidation feasibility study defeated," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 13, 1976, p. 1.
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- 19 "Stimpfling maps out plenty of changes," Great Falls Tribune, Feb. 11, 1976, p. 10.
- 20 "Keep the manager," Great Falls Tribune, March 29, 1976, p. 4.
- 21 "No broken promise," Great Falls Tribune, April 9, 1976, p. 1.
- 22 "Different forms cause problems," Great Falls Tribune, April 21, 1976, p. 8.
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24. "Study commissioner cautions against proposal," Great Falls Tribune, Aug. 4, 1975, p. 19.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. "Mayor-council not for league," Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 21, 1975, p. 12.
28. "Political endorsements split local chairmen," Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 27, 1975, p. 8.
29. "Apathy about government?" Great Falls Tribune, July 24, 1974, p. 6.
30. Picture, Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 8, 1974, p. 12.
31. "City government study panelists disagree on alternative to suggest," Great Falls Tribune, Aug. 14, 1975, p. 20.
32. "Study of government switch focused on problems, people," Great Falls Tribune, Sept. 17, 1975, p. 28.
33. "Alternate city government recommendation in limbo," Great Falls Tribune, Nov. 5, 1975, p. 8.
34. "City-county consolidation ideas to be heard tonight," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 12, 1976, p. 1.
35. "City-county consolidation feasibility study defeated," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 15, 1976, p. 4.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. "Democrats criticize charter proposal," Great Falls Tribune, April 9, 1976, p. 8.
40. "Political endorsement split local chairmen," Great Falls Tribune, Oct. 27, 1975, p. 8.

⁴¹"Reject the suboptions," Great Falls Tribune, Sept. 30, 1977, p. 5.

⁴²Jack Stimpfling to Pam Newbern, letter, Dec. 8, 1984.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Unsigned letter to Pam Newbern from Great Falls Study Commission member in response to questionnaire sent to members of commission. Because some members did not respond, it is impossible to ascertain who wrote the letter, Nov. 28, 1984.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶William James, telephoned in Great Falls, Montana, Nov. 25, 1984.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Bird and Merwin, eds, The Press and Society.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰James interview, Nov. 25, 1984.

⁵¹Jack Stimpfling to Pam Newbern, Dec. 8, 1984.

⁵²Bird and Merwin, eds., The Press and Society.

⁵³"Democrats authorize pledge funds for charter," Great Falls Tribune, July 29, 1978, p. 5.

⁵⁴Bird and Merwin, eds., The Press and Society.

⁵⁵James interview, Nov. 25, 1984.

⁵⁶Bird and Merwin, eds, The Press and Society.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

- 59 Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles, adopted 1975.
- 60 "Merger plans premature," Great Falls Tribune, Jan. 15, 1975, p. 4.
- 61 Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles, Adopted 1975.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Letter, Great Falls Tribune, May 9, 1970, p. 1.
- 65 The Tribune had several editorials which did so, among them were ones published on July 24, 1970, p. 1; Jan. 12, 1971, p. 6; and Jan. 15, 1976, p. 4.
- 66 Newspaper Editors' Statement of Principles, Adopted 1975.
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- 5 "Reggen Criticizes 'Weak-Mayor' System, Missoulian, Dec. 4, 1974, p. 2.
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- 18 "Disincorporation Procedure Outlined at Joint Meeting," Missoulian, Aug. 19, 1975, p. 2.
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26. "Lolo Residents Quiz Study Commissioners," Missoulian, March 11, 1976, p. 2.
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