

Herald to merge with Red Wing paper

Digital memberships to launch in October

RiverTown Multimedia officials announced this week the Pierce County Herald will have its content merged into a new print publication that also covers Red Wing.

The newspaper will be called the Republican Eagle, which serves Red Wing, Ellsworth, along with Pierce and Goodhue counties. The change takes effect with the Aug. 7 edition.

The merger is part of a divisionwide change that will see newspapers from Hudson, River Falls and New Richmond fold into the Star-Observer and the Woodbury Bulletin combine with the South Washington County Bulletin to become the Bulletin. Another RiverTown newspaper, the Hastings Star Gazette, will remain a stand-alone publication.

RiverTown Multimedia Publisher Neal Ronquist said the Republican Eagle name was chosen for its strong brand recognition in the area and its established association with the Ellsworth community, which the paper covered before RiverTown purchased the Herald.

"We value your loyal readership and look forward to the opportunity to continue to serve the Ellsworth community, and all of Pierce County, via the Republican Eagle," Ronquist said. "We're going to be delivering more pages, more news content, more advertising content in print than we have been."

The print changes coincide with a digital transition among all RiverTown Multimedia properties. Beginning Aug. 6, content from the news group's communities will merge onto www.rivertowns.net.

Digital memberships

In coming weeks, RiverTown will join other Forum News Service properties in adopting a "digital membership model," which company officials said will provide paid access to news

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from all communities in the RiverTown coverage area and beyond.

Ronquist said the shift toward a digital-first model represents a changing vision for the news group — one he said will result in more content, not less.

“We understand some of our audience members prefer to read content in print form and these mergers allow us to gain critical efficiencies allowing the continuation of print products in these markets,” Ronquist said. “Our audience is gravitating more toward our digital products and that’s required an investment in our news websites, adding to our video capabilities and reinvesting in more reporters to better cover our communities.”

The Rivertowns.net website will include in-site links to coverage from the Star-Observer, Republican Eagle, Bulletin and Star Gazette. RiverTown leaders said data will help editors and reporters determine coverage from communities surrounding those established hubs.

“If something isn’t that important to a majority of our readers we probably won’t be providing coverage,” Ronquist said.

Some content will be free, though the membership model will require digital subscriptions for access to content that will be placed behind a paywall. Ronquist said that in order to continue providing reporting resources, it is necessary to charge readers.

“We simply can no longer afford to give away our valuable content for free online,” he said. “That’s why we will be rolling out a new membership model that allows our loyal digital audience members to support community journalism in exchange for premium content and exclusive perks.”

Common ground

Ronquist said the merger realizes savings by producing fewer print pages. Common content and advertisements already exist between the Herald and the Republican Eagle newspapers, Ronquist explained, saying the merger will streamline that content and reduce print costs.

More savings are realized by having one long press run under the merged papers versus multiple short runs under the existing system, Ronquist said.

He said the company took into account proximity, along with where readers shop and do business already, in establishing papers to merge.

RiverTown Multimedia News Director Anne Jacobson said it was a logical decision.

“Red Wing and western Pierce County are essentially the same market, albeit divided by the Mississippi River and the state line,” said Jacobson, who has also served as editor of the RE since 2003. “More than 30 percent of Red Wing’s workforce crosses the bridge into Minnesota every day, and hundreds of Minnesotans make the commute to Pierce County.”

Print subscriptions, which will increase, will include digital access to RiverTown communities and all Forum News Service properties, which include the Duluth News Tribune, the Fargo Forum, the Grand Forks Herald, recently acquired Rochester Post Bulletin and the Willmar, Minn.-based West Central Tribune.

The local paywall launches in October, when digital-only memberships will become available. Ronquist said readers can participate immediately by subscribing to a print-digital membership bundle. The new website will direct readers where to access memberships.

Ronquist said user survey feedback was harnessed in constructing the new sites, which he said provide a “cleaner look” and an enhanced user experience.

Community-driven journalism will remain the focus, he said.

“We may be delivering the news via a different medium, but we’re committed to providing reporting rooted in integrity and truth telling,” Ronquist said. “We want to connect our communities for years to come and frankly our communities need us to do it. In order to provide quality, local journalism we need the support of readers, support of businesses. We need the support of our communities.”

RiverTown will honor existing print subscriptions until they expire. Ronquist said there will be a rate increase “soon” as a result of the move to the membership model and the digital paywall.

Customers who have questions about the new products may call 800-284-3402 or contact Customer Service via email subscriptionservices@rivertowns.net.