

Tom Still: For Burgess, commitment to community journalism started at the top

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Jim Burgess strolled up to my newsroom desk and I was expecting the worst. As the publisher of the Wisconsin State Journal, Burgess had no doubt caught wind from the paper's advertising staff that a major box store had pulled its ads – thanks to an editorial, written by me, published that morning.

The editorial criticized the box store chain's leadership for their tone-deaf response to legitimate zoning and traffic concerns raised by local government. As always, Burgess' face was hard to read as he approached, but then he said:

"Thomas, that editorial was dead on. They'll be back in the paper within two weeks."

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Burgess, who died Dec. 20 at 85, was right. The box store's full-page ads were back in short order because it needed the newspaper to reach potential customers. For this rookie editorial page editor, it was a reminder that newspapers exist for reasons beyond selling ads and making money. They exist to inform and serve the communities they call home.

At least, that's how it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Burgess was publisher of the State Journal, and how it continued with his successor, Phil Blake. For too many news outlets today, however, my "box store editorial" memory is just that: A thing of the past.

Some newspapers no longer have editorial pages at all, in part they're afraid of offending readers in a hyper-partisan age. Others rely on bland opinions or canned missives from elsewhere. Still others cleverly disguise their opinion pieces as straight news – a practice perfected by some major broadcast networks.

For Burgess, the editorial page was an extension of the paper's overall mission, which he saw as ferreting out news, writing it as tightly as possible, connecting with readers and engaging the community where possible. Making money was always a goal, too, but Burgess saw quality journalism as the pathway for doing so.

Journalism today has no shortage of reporters, editors and publishers who believe in performing at the highest level, but economic pressures often get the best of them. Many community news organizations have been beaten down by decades of digital competition from outlets that will never cover City Hall, the school board, your kid's high school sports – let alone that ominous big box store going up down the road.

During his stint as publisher in Madison, Burgess pushed for what is now Monona Terrace Convention Center because he was convinced it would help to revive a sagging downtown. Our editorial pages took up the cause in a vigorous campaign that helped make it happen.

He was active with the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce, Edgewood College, Meriter Hospital, the UW Medical Foundation, the Overture Center and what is now the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

Burgess was also a leader in state, regional and national press organizations. He gave back to the profession in many ways, including his work in establishing the Center for Journalism Ethics in the UW-Madison's School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Burgess wasn't shy about sticking his nose into public policy, either. Most notably, he was chairman of the 1995 state Study of Administrative Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Commission.

"Jim Burgess was an unsung giant of Wisconsin governance who made this state a better place as a journalist, publisher, citizen commission leader and dedicated conservationist," said Jeff Smoller, who was executive director of the [SAVE Commission](#) and press secretary to the late Gov. Patrick J. Lucey. "His measured voice will be missed. We desperately need more like him today."

The test is whether community journalism can produce more like Jim Burgess in an era when it is being tested by market forces, changed news consumption habits and, most seriously, political divisions compel many people to read or watch only that news which reinforces their personal take on the world.

If vigorous community journalism – print, broadcast or digital – goes away, so will your ability to learn and democratically act upon what’s happening down the street or across town. With Jim Burgess, that sense of commitment started at the top.

— Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council. He is a former associate editor of the Wisconsin State Journal.