

# JOA threatens survival of suburban papers

By Wayne Paal  
staff writer

A joint operating agreement between the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press makes metro newspapering a whole new ballgame, suburban newspaper officials said.

Staying in the game, they believe, means continuing grassroots coverage, while updating marketing and advertising strategies to meet the demands of a more competitive market.

The U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way Monday for the newspaper merger to occur. (For details, see related story.)

"There's no question the joining of two large urban papers in a JOA is a major step," said Richard Aginlan, president of Suburban Communications Inc., parent company for the 13

Observer & Eccentric newspapers. "But we're going to continue doing what we've been doing — providing excellent local coverage for our readers."

Suburban publishers believe established weeklies and dailies can not only survive, but prosper — at least for the short term — as their downtown competitors begin implementing a marketing and advertising strategy of their own.

"THERE'S GOING to be an awful lot of confusion, yet there's a window of opportunity for suburban newspapers who are already strong, who have already established themselves," said Wayne Studer, general manager of the Daily Tribune, Royal Oak. "We're closer to the grassroots, we can talk to our community like no one else can."

That view is shared by Bruce McIntyre, publisher of the Pontiac-based Oakland Press.

"The secure and well-managed newspapers will continue to do OK," McIntyre said.

Nonetheless, suburban papers have been making changes, whether prompted by the anticipated JOA or not.

The Observer & Eccentric recently added a new paper in Oakland County's lakes region and beefed up coverage of commercial and residential development.

The Daily Tribune, now under the management of Adams Communications, has placed a greater emphasis upon grassroots news, Studer said.

Its aggressive parent company also acquired the Macomb Daily in Mount Clemens as well as other non-

dailies in Macomb. Adams is also launching a new string of suburban weeklies in areas on the fringe of both dailies' circulation area.

The Observer & Eccentric has joined with Adams in the Suburban Press Ring (SPRING) enabling advertisers to buy combined space in O&E and Adams newspapers, as well as those of the Associated and Heritage newspapers, two separate weekly chains in suburban Wayne County.

SPRING formed not because of the JOA, Aginlan said, but because newspapers were already faced with a competitive, changing market.

"We formed SPRING because there were two things happening," he said. "One was the influx of large scale retailers like Target and Kohl's. The other was that mom and pop operations began to expand."

Aginlan said.

The Oakland Press added a new offset press to expand its capability, McIntyre said.

Though the JOA was shrouded in controversy from its beginning some three years ago, suburban publishers' reactions were mixed.

"My reaction: It's over," said Aginlan. McIntyre added he was "tired of talking about the JOA."

Studer, a former Free Press employee, provided the most strongly worded reaction. The JOA, he said, was "a travesty."

"I hated to see a lot of my good friends go through all this and others be put out on the street," he said.

Suburban Communications has competed with another JOA. Company weekly papers in Cincinnati compete against that city's JOA, Aginlan said.

"I'd say it was a neutral situation," he said. "But the (Cincinnati) Enquirer did begin issuing zoned, suburban editions."

Suburban press officials declined speculation on whether the Supreme Court's ruling made them winners or losers.

"If anyone is going to take a beating it's the readers of the Detroit newspapers," said McIntyre, pointing to an expected price increase for both dailies, as well as combined weekend editions.

One thing they agree on, however, is that inaction in the face of the JOA would automatically make them losers.

"It's like riding a two-wheeled bicycle," Aginlan said. "You've got to keep moving, otherwise you'll fall."

## ... court approves JOA for two Detroit dailies

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling upholding a joint operating agreement between Detroit's daily newspapers, "was a victory for Michigan and the metro area," according to the executive editor of the newspaper that sought the agreement.

"If you look at the Newspaper Preservation Act, it was designed to preserve separate and independent editorial voices and that is clearly the case here," said Heath Meriwether of the Detroit Free Press.

The act, approved by Congress in 1970, allows for newspaper mergers,

though the Free Press/News JOA is the largest ever approved.

Without the 100-year agreement, Meriwether said, there was no doubt Knight-Ridder, the paper's parent company, would have closed the paper.

"IF THAT happened, there would have been a real loss to the Detroit area and to Michigan," Meriwether said. "We practice journalism that makes a difference in people's lives."

Choosing his words carefully, he

said other area newspapers couldn't match the Free Press' history, personalities or commitment to social issues and social change.

"I'm not knocking what anyone is doing, but this is a 158-year institution," he said. "You can't replace that with a chain of papers around a metropolitan area."

The high court voted 4-4 to uphold lower court rulings in favor of the JOA.

Those who fought the agreement vowed to move their fight from the courts to Congress.

"The closeness of the (court) votes, at all levels, indicates the Newspaper Preservation Act must be looked at again," said Edward Wendover,

publisher of the Community Crier in Plymouth and an outspoken JOA foe. JOA foes were considering whether to ask the high court for a re-hearing, Wendover said.

One area Congressman also criticized the ruling.

"I've always believed the pen is mightier than the sword, but it now appears the corporate bottom line is greater than both," said U.S. Rep.

Carl Pursell, R-Plymouth, an initial JOA supporter.

The merger allows the Free Press and News to combine business operations, though spokesmen for each newspaper said each would maintain a separate editorial policy.

Among changes, the News morning edition will no longer be available by home subscription. Both newspapers will also combine weekend editions. Though it is widely speculated that both newspapers will increase their newsstand price, no announcement was made.

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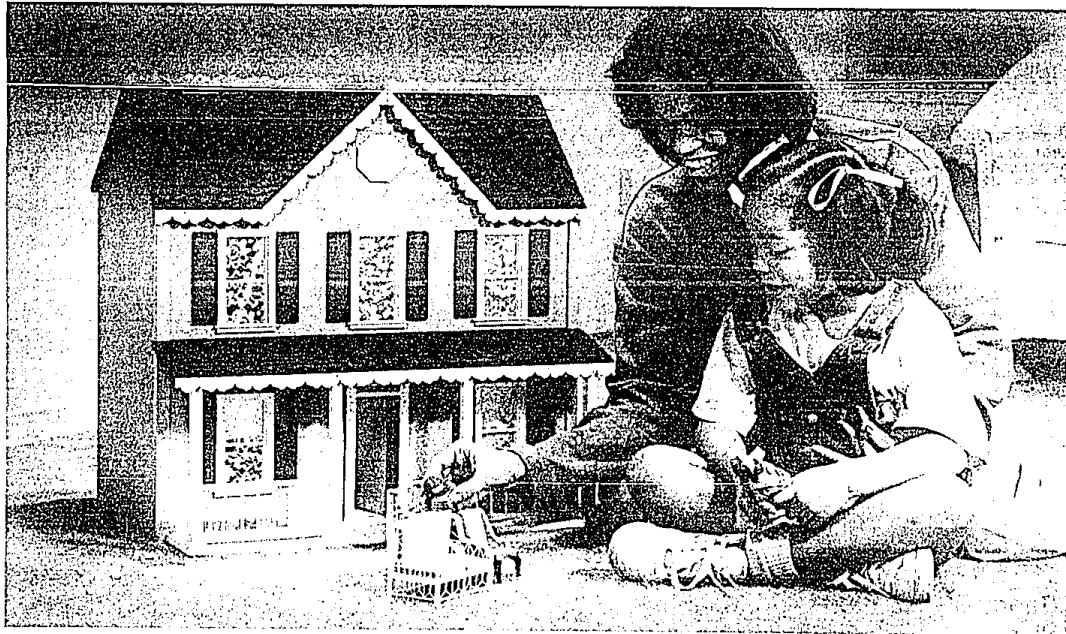
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