

# East Lansing Info

Report and Recommendations of the Task Force

---

---

*[www.eastlansinginfo.news](http://www.eastlansinginfo.news)*

*Aug. 1, 2022*

---

*Produced by Alice Dreger, Chris Root, Morgan Lees,  
Nathan Andrus, and Amalia Medina (the Task Force).*



We bring East Lansing the news.



## TABLE OF

# Contents



**04 | LETTER FROM THE ELI BOARD PRESIDENT**



**05 | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**07**

**SECTION 01:**  
Introduction



**09**

**SECTION 02:**  
ELi's Mission  
and History



**18**

**SECTION 03:**  
Recommendations  
for ELi's Future –  
Staffing and Budget



**25**

**SECTION 04:**  
Relaunch Work Plan



**30**

**SECTION 05:**  
How You Can Help  
the Relaunch



## Appendices

**32 | APPENDIX A:** ELi's Revenue and Expenses Shown by Fiscal Year

**33 | APPENDIX B:** Transition of ELi's Website Away from the Largo WordPress Theme

**34 | APPENDIX C:** Consideration of a Ghost-Based Membership Newsletter

**35 | APPENDIX D:** Opportunities Worth Considering in the Longer-Term

**36 | APPENDIX E:** Overview Timeline of ELi Relaunch, Including Year-End Fundraising



We bring  
East Lansing  
the news.

[www.eastlansinginfo.news](http://www.eastlansinginfo.news)

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Raymond D. Vlasin | *President*  
Chuck Grigsby | *Treasurer*  
Amalia Medina | *Secretary*  
Cody Harrell | *Public Editor*  
Adan Tomas Quan | *Director at Large*

## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Alice Dreger | *Publisher/Executive Director*  
Jodi Spicer | *General Manager*  
Morgan Lees | *Tech Manager*  
Lisa Lees | *Tech Manager*

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Website | [eastlansinginfo.news](http://eastlansinginfo.news)  
Postal | *POB 115, East Lansing MI 48826*  
Facebook | [@eastlansinginfo](https://www.facebook.com/eastlansinginfo)  
Twitter | [@eastlansinginfo](https://twitter.com/eastlansinginfo)

Recipient of the 2018 Crystal Award for  
public service to the people of East Lansing

ELi is a 501(c)(3) public charity. Donations  
are tax deductible to the fullest extent  
allowed by law.

July 25, 2022

ELi Task Force Members  
ELi Board of Directors  
East Lansing, Michigan

Dear Colleagues:

The Board of Directors accepts your quality analytical document to aid it in understanding what will be required to resume operations reasonably similar to what ELi has offered in the past. The Board thanks the Task Force members and those who assisted it in creating this document in advance of the near impossible end-of-July target.

You have provided an immense service by enumerating the recommendations for various actions required. And, you have shown the significant challenges for the Board and the ELi community more generally in restoring the factual news and information about East Lansing in a timely and comprehensive manner.

We commend you for your creative work and recommend that you proceed to release the report to the public. Our sincere thanks.

Raymond D. Vlasin  
President  
ELi Board of Directors





## PREFACE

# Executive Summary

East Lansing Info (ELi) – the East Lansing community’s dedicated nonprofit news service – takes a major step towards the restart of publication with completion and release of this Task Force Report. Our plan calls for reporting to resume by early September although, as outlined in this report, relaunch will be a heavy lift for the ELi staff and the community at large.

In early May 2022, ELi ceased reporting operations due to loss of key personnel. Two months earlier, ELi Founder and then-Executive Director/Publisher Alice Dreger had started a long-planned sabbatical from ELi after giving eight years of mostly unpaid service to the organization she founded.

It is common for small nonprofits to stumble when founders step away, but we were all disappointed, after all the planning that went into the sabbatical, that this had happened to ELi.

On June 23, 2022, ELi’s Board of Directors authorized this special Task Force to do an analysis of the institutional challenges and provide a recommendation for how ELi could resume reporting. The Task Force started working together intensively two days later, and one month from that start, we presented our report to the Board. On July 25, the Board voted to accept our report.

This report includes key information about the history and methodology of ELi, including an overview of revenue and expenses over the last eight years.

It concludes that ELi should attempt to return to the basic approach it had when operations paused: providing original, high-quality news reporting by local people focusing on East Lansing City government, East Lansing Public Schools (especially the School Board), local elections, redevelopment, public safety (including policing and emergencies), and arts and culture.

Financially, this is going to be difficult because ELi has limited savings and some donors have

understandably pulled away during the reporting lull. We offer a start-up annual budget of about \$141,000, but that is the bare minimum we can foresee for operating at a reasonable level (initially providing about 5 articles a week instead of the prior average of about 10).

At present, ELi has about \$43,000 in the bank with about \$2,100 in monthly donor commitments remaining. It is difficult to cut expenses at ELi because costs have already been kept very low, with the last calendar year of operations coming in at a total of about \$190,000. As we document, the great majority of costs at ELi are personnel related. Cutting costs any further would mean too few people to make the organization run.

Besides recommending other forms of fundraising, the Task Force has recommended adopting a newsletter-based membership model that may help both with raising revenue and with better distribution – serving more readers in ways that are more efficient and effective for them – while still ultimately keeping ELi’s news reporting free to everyone.

Because we recognized that it would be very difficult for ELi to hire in and train so many new key personnel at once, including a new Managing Editor, by mutual agreement with the Board of Directors, ELi founder Alice Dreger is now retaking the helm as Interim Executive Director and Publisher (C.E.O. of the nonprofit corporation).

The agreement between the Board and Dreger states that she will not be paid and will be expected to put in very limited hours so that she can also meet all of the non-ELi work and family obligations she has acquired since her sabbatical started. ELi will be seeking someone to replace her as Executive Director/Publisher when operations stabilize.

On July 25, the Board also authorized establishment of an Implementation Team that will take over where this Task Force’s work ends. The team will be made up of volunteers and staff and will get to work on hiring our new Managing Editor and reporters, creating a new membership system and newsletter, and more. To succeed, the team will absolutely need community help as outlined in this report. (More on that below.)

Fortunately, ELi still has extraordinarily fine core administrative staff working for it. The Task Force wishes to particularly recognize Morgan Lees and Lisa Lees – the exceptional Tech Managers who have been with ELi from the start and who keep a news website that looks simple secure and fully operational for all of us – and Jodi Spicer, ELi’s General Manager, who runs all of ELi’s financial and

data systems, manages payroll, balances the books, maintains complex secure donor information, and much more. It would have been effectively impossible to restart ELi's operations without them.

In the last section of the report, we provide details of the kind of help we are seeking from the community with a [link to a form](#) that allows a simple way for the Implementation Team to receive and triage offers.

We are also interested in feedback on this report, not only from members of our own geographic community but also from colleagues who work in small nonprofits and journalism. You can use [ELi's contact page](#) to make initial contact.

Finally, we would like to thank Cait Palmiter for designing this report in a way that makes it maximally comprehensible.

**We are also interested in feedback on this report, not only from members of our own geographic community but also from colleagues who work in small nonprofits and journalism.**

*ELi Task Force*





## SECTION 01

# Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction and mandate:

East Lansing Info (ELi), a local news organization located in East Lansing, Michigan, was incorporated in 2014 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Its purpose has been to provide factual news and information about East Lansing in a timely and comprehensible manner, filling a news and information gap that had previously left residents largely in the dark about the actions of the East Lansing City government and the East Lansing Public Schools' (ELPS') School Board as well as about other local concerns.

For reasons explained below, ELi stopped all reporting operations on May 7, 2022. On June 23, 2022, ELi's Board of Directors requested that the members of this Task Force convene and produce a report to be shared with the public that would have two major components: (a) descriptions of ELi's purposes and accomplishments and of the current state of the organization; and (b) recommendations about ELi's possible future paths. The ELi Board indicated they were not interested in a discussion of shutting down the organization.

On June 25, 2022, recognizing the importance of moving quickly, the Task Force held its first meeting and began developing this report with the aim of submitting it to the Board by the end of July. Even with this promised short timeframe, the Task Force decided that the Board could not hold off on taking important actions until it received the full Task Force's report, so the Task Force also made some preliminary recommendations to the Board before its final report. This has been an unusually dynamic, shifting process. Our approach has been to work collaboratively in outlining the report contents, with individual members breaking off

sections to research and draft. The editorial process has also been collaborative.<sup>1</sup>

We have moved quickly because of the Board's stated interest in having ELi be eligible for NewsMatch, the national philanthropic matching grant campaign for nonprofit news organizations. To be eligible this year for NewsMatch, ELi needs to resume reporting in September. Recognizing that operations cannot resume without a new Managing Editor (M.E.), the Task Force recommended the Board immediately open the search for a new M.E., and it composed a job description and announcement for the Board. That search was announced and opened on July 15, 2022. Several candidates have already applied.

The aim of this report is to help the ELi Board and East Lansing-interested community understand what will be required to resume operations reasonably similar to what ELi has offered in the past.

We wish to note that the role of the Task Force is limited to production of this report and its recommendations. Implementation will present a significant challenge for the Board and the East Lansing community more generally.

### 1.2 ELi is undertaking a major transition:

From the time of ELi's founding through early 2022, ELi's founder Alice Dreger, Ph.D., provided many services to ELi, including for years at a time working as the Board President and C.E.O, Publisher, Managing Editor, lead investigative reporter, and lead fundraiser.

After more than a year of discussion and preparation, with the Board's consent, Dreger decided to take a long break from ELi starting on February 1, 2022. At the time her sabbatical was announced, Dreger was serving as Executive Director and Publisher, City Desk editor, reporter, and fundraiser. Emily Joan Elliott, Ph.D., who had been ELi's Managing Editor at that point, took on the position of Acting Executive Director.

About seven weeks later, Elliott announced that she was leaving the organization to accept a position with H-Net, an international interdisciplinary organization of scholars and teachers based at Michigan State University (MSU). Because Elliott had effectively been operating at that point as both Managing Editor and Executive Director, ELi was left without staff for the top two positions. Elliott

<sup>1</sup> Adan Quan, an East Lansing High School student member of ELi's Board, participated in some of the Task Force's earlier meetings and contributed ideas incorporated in Appendix D, and Chuck Grigsby, a new member of ELi's Board, participated in later discussions.





had also been working to lead donor relations when she left. (These were all positions Dreger had filled previously.)

The Board was unable to identify individuals to fill these positions quickly and consequently decided it had to “pause” reporting in early May 2022, effectively laying off all editorial and reporting staff. The Board also transitioned around this

time, with President Sam Hosey and Vice President Jiquanda Johnson retiring from the Board and new members coming on, including Anne Hill, Cody Harrell, and Chuck Grigsby.

Another layer of turmoil was added with the development of a controversy in late June about Hill’s work outside of ELi questioning the legitimacy of elections in East Lansing. ELi’s Board formed a Rapid Response Team (RRT) under its existing Defense Policy to deal with that organizational problem. After thorough research and consultation, the Board ultimately **voted** on July 19 to remove Hill, who had also been acting as Interim Executive Director (essentially the C.E.O.), leaving ELi again without an E.D.

The result of this sequence of events has been a protracted crisis state at ELi, reflected in concerned communications from prior readers and a loss of donor confidence based on (hopefully temporary) withdrawal of financial support by some. The Board, the Task Force, and some members of the staff who are normally paid have had to undertake an extraordinary level of volunteer work this summer.

Meanwhile, the loss of news to the community has been significant. While other local news organizations including The State News, WKAR, the Lansing State Journal, the City Pulse, WILX, MLive, and others have covered some of what has been happening in East Lansing, no other news organization has been able to step in and fill the huge gaps left by the loss of ELi’s reporting, including on important public meetings and in terms of dedicated investigative journalism.

In response to the difficulty caused by the renewed vacancy in the E.D. position and the hopeful response to the search for a new Managing Editor, ELi Founder Alice Dreger made an offer to the Board on July 25 to become Interim Executive Director on a voluntary basis for a maximum of five hours/week, to begin immediately. Her offer was accepted with gratitude.

At the same meeting, the Board adopted a recommendation by Dreger to form an Implementation Team that will assist with administrative tasks that are needed to relaunch ELi. The Board approved this recommendation as well. This team, which is still in formation, will essentially provide assistance with necessary staff functions while ELi is building back both its staff capacity and its ability to raise income.

Dreger’s returning as Interim E.D. and the creation of an Implementation Team create more optimistic conditions for ELi to successfully reemerge and return to reporting local news for and about East Lansing.







## SECTION 02

# ELi's Mission and History

### 2.1 ELi's mission and lived values:

While ELi's Board has never voted on a specific mission statement, ELi's staff have for years stated the mission simply as this: "We bring East Lansing the news." More specifically, ELi aims to bring news of East Lansing that is factual, meaningful, timely, clear, nonpartisan, and fair.

The goal of ELi has never been to make money or to build an empire. It has been to make sure the people who live, work, retire, go to school, do business, govern, visit, and play in East Lansing are able to know what is going on here. In this way, ELi has aimed fundamentally to be a socially responsible local news provider.

In order to make up for local news gaps, ELi has aimed its resources at important subjects that are otherwise not covered by other local news organizations. Our services have included watchdogging and providing investigative reporting. After eight years of service, ELi has become known for steady governmental coverage, deep dives, and longitudinal data analysis. We have aimed high and delivered.

In choosing the stories that ELi covers, ELi's editorial staff have tended to focus on what year-round residents would want to know. That is the audience that experienced the biggest news gap before ELi. It is also the audience that is most engaged in terms of local voting and most heavily taxed in terms of local taxes. Additionally, it is the audience that disproportionately includes families with children in East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS).

Transparency is something ELi has always valued in government as well as in our own work. We have tried to keep donors and readers apprised of the finances of ELi so that they can "follow the money" in our organization and remain confident that we are doing what we can to remain editorially independent and fiscally prudent.

This community project – now a community asset – has involved hundreds of people over eight

years working together as administrators, reporters, editors, photographers, donors, tipsters, and advisors so that East Lansing has been able to keep itself informed. It has been a way in which this community has sought to take care of itself.

While the Task Force envisions that ELi's reporting coverage scope might become narrower or wider in the future, we would not expect that the basic mission or ethos would ever change.

### 2.2 ELi is a public service organization:

ELi is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit news organization that reports primarily through our website, eastlansinginfo.news. A volunteer (unpaid) Board of Directors oversees ELi and does so on behalf of the community.

To function, ELi has relied primarily on reader donations, not only because that's where we find support but because such dependence keeps us responsive to our community. Support requires trust, and trust requires responsibility.

In terms of organizational structure, the ELi Board chooses (hires and fires) an Executive Director (E.D.)/Publisher who functions as the C.E.O. of the organization. The E.D. is ultimately responsible for all staff, including their hiring and firing.

Other general administrative staff include a General Manager (bookkeeper; payroll and accounts manager; compliance clerk; donor database tech; etc), Tech Managers who primarily manage ELi's WordPress site (ELi's main product), and a Donor Relations Manager (Development Director).

Editorial staff include a Managing Editor (M.E.), assistant editors, reporters, photographers, data analysts, proofers, and social media managers. The Managing Editor is the most important position at ELi in terms of day-to-day news production (and this is the reason the Task Force recommended an immediate search for a new M.E., as discussed in Section 1.1).

In practice, some people play more than one role in ELi, as ELi has been a highly collaborative grassroots effort from the time it began. ELi's staff leaders have run an efficient organization and focused spending on local people – working to avoid paying big national corporations for things like Facebook ad "boosts" when we could be paying local people to bring the news. They have taken seriously ELi's goal of keeping locally-donated dollars in the local economy.

Our nonprofit approach means that we do not judge ELi's work by what maximizes revenue. Instead, we pay attention to whether we are meeting



our goals of informing and empowering the local public (including voters, long-time and short-term residents, and others) with meaningful local news and information. The editing and reporting staff regularly discuss what they want out of a story versus what the community needs – and use the latter to guide ELi’s work.

We have (so far) no newsroom – we maintain no central office – and we have kept expenses extremely low compared to other news organizations engaged in the same level of production. In calendar year 2021, for example, our total expenses came to about \$190,000.

ELi has been surviving by keeping expenses low – bringing an incredible depth and consistency of news at a fraction of the traditional cost for news production. We can do this partly because current tech allows news production to cost a small percentage of what it cost in, say, 1980 to bring news reporting and editing, photos, audio, a print edition, etc.

We also benefit from people who donate their labor or work for wages far below their value, we think very carefully about how to spend money, and we leverage partnerships with groups like Impact Radio and the League of Women Voters.

After eight years of service, ELi’s readers now expect us to show up every day, expect us to listen to them, and expect us to care. Our readers and listeners quite actively engage with us as advisors, tipsters, and even “editors” in the sense that they send corrections and sometimes work with us on drafts if we need their special expertise to get things right. We are different from a traditional news organization in that many of us do not have formal training in journalism but rather come to this work through content or method expertise and experience.

ELi has never instituted a paywall for its reporting. However, as noted below, the Task Force recommends implementing a “membership” model newsletter upon relaunch. (See Appendix C on the possible use of Ghost for such a product.) Such a newsletter would give “members”<sup>2</sup> – i.e., donors who contribute a stated minimum dollar figure per year – access to our reporting through an emailed newsletter sooner than it will become generally available for free on our website, except for the case of emergency reporting which would be immediately available to all. But even if that model is adopted,

all of our reporting would ultimately continue to be available for free.

We note that a great [guide to using membership models](#) in nonprofit news has been produced by the Lenfest Institute. As Ariel Zirulnick, Emily Goligowski, and Jay Rosen write in the introductory section, “Defining Membership”:

[The use of a membership system] is an editorial orientation that sees readers and listeners as much more than a source of monetary support. Members actively contribute. In its deeper forms, it is a two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members. It is an opportunity to identify your strongest supporters, and enlist them in your quest for impact and sustainability.

In many cases, membership is an agreement to keep access to journalism free for all. Many members don’t want a gate around the journalism they’re supporting. They are advocates for that journalism, and advocates have an interest in exposing as many people as possible to their cause.

ELi already has had hundreds of donors who are in the relationship described here. So, in some ways, we already have a system akin to this. The Task Force believes that ELi is therefore well poised to formalize a membership model that can help cement relationships and give us a better shot at sustainability.

### 2.3 History of reporting:

The first version of ELi (what we are calling ELi 1.0), existing on a Drupal platform at [eastlansing-info.org](http://eastlansing-info.org), was started by Alice Dreger in 2012 as an unincorporated citizen news cooperative, running like a volunteer service organization rather than as a business.

The idea of ELi 1.0 was to provide a place where factual local reporting could be shared among people who wanted to know more about what was happening here in East Lansing. Lisa Lees and Morgan Lees provided website help. Various local people contributed articles on local government, big real estate development, recreational opportunities, and so on.

<sup>2</sup>ELi’s Bylaws state under Article II, “There shall be no members.” The Bylaws are referring to members that are equivalent to corporate shareholders. The membership model we are discussing here is not a shareholder model but rather a subscription-donation system. See [The Membership Guide](#) for the concept we are broaching here.



While that first version of ELi enjoyed some success in terms of news provision, without a paid staff, the reporting was irregular.

In 2014, in response to what she saw as deeply problematic local news gaps around such issues as the prolonged BWL power outage of Winter Solstice 2013, the City of East Lansing's pension crisis, and big downtown redevelopment, Dreger decided to create a 501(c)(3) nonprofit public-service news version of ELi (what we are calling ELi 2.0).

The original Board of Directors, which stayed together for several years while the organization grew legs, was made up of Dreger, former mayor Vic Loomis, MSU Law Professor Michael Lawrence, and MSU Natural Sciences Professor Stephen Thomas. This 2.0 version used a blend of paid and volunteer staff.

In 2020, Morgan and Lisa Lees successfully transitioned ELi 2.0 from its Drupal platform at [eastlansinginfo.org](http://eastlansinginfo.org) to a WordPress platform running the Institute for Nonprofit News' Largo theme at [eastlansinginfo.news](http://eastlansinginfo.news). The material at the .org site has now been stabilized and archived. (If ELi continues operations, the Largo theme will need to be replaced in a few years, a labor- and cost-intensive process; see Appendix B.)

By 2021, ELi had begun to branch out in terms of its media offerings, creating a podcast that was broadcast on Sunday mornings at Impact Radio (the MSU student radio station) and developing a "best of ELi's reporting" paper edition that generated a lot of excitement. ELi was also in the midst of developing a Memorandum of Understanding for a news-sharing partnership with WKAR, the local NPR affiliate licensed to the MSU Board of Trustees, when publication stopped in May 2022.

Over the years, as ELi's work expanded in terms of scope and outreach, the number of ELi staff members volunteering their labor dropped significantly and the group we think of as "core staff" grew substantially, with most of them being paid – although often paid less than their labor may be worth in other, less stressed industries.

ELi 2.0 has used a "two sets of eyes" policy, meaning that nothing is published without going through "two sets of eyes," including the reporter's and an assigned editor's. (The only exceptions are emergency reporting, and even then, we have made sure to get a second set of eyes on the work as soon as possible.) In practice, it has not been unusual for articles to be edited by a second editor (e.g., both the Managing Editor and the E.D./Publisher) and to then be checked by a proofreader. Complex and sensitive articles may go through many drafts and

many editors with the staff checking with outside local experts for quality control.

Journalism colleagues in Michigan and nationally have commented on how ELi is extraordinary in terms of the level of in-depth and investigative reporting it produces. Few local news organizations – and none that we know of in terms of our size budget – bring this level of reporting.

The quality and scope of ELi's reporting depends a great deal on the Managing Editor. As noted above, the M.E. position is the most important position at ELi in terms of production of news. ELi's Managing Editors have included (in chronological order) Dudley "Smitty" Smith, Ann Graham Nichols, Alice Dreger, and Emily Joan Elliott.

ELi has done tremendous work for the community in terms of reporting. For example, ELi has provided important coverage of emergencies, including on the local impacts of COVID-19, utility outages, gas leaks, sewer and storm flooding, and more. It has provided important investigative reporting on the big private-public redevelopment deals in East Lansing's downtown, examining contracts and bond deals and the problematic system used for fire inspections (fixed following ELi's reporting). ELi has researched and reported on City budgets including the pension crisis and carefully examined policing practices in East Lansing, including with regard to racial bias in police-initiated stops, arrests, and use of force by East Lansing Police Department (ELPD) officers.

Prior to ELi's pause in May 2022, ELi's [eastlansinginfo.news](http://eastlansinginfo.news) website averaged 10,000 views per week from an average of 5,000 visitors per week. Visitorship peaked during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, with a high of 15,743 views in one day (June 23, 2022). ELi's most widely read reporting included that on COVID-19, local emergencies, retirements of long-time local educators, and local elections.

The relaunch of ELi will necessarily be constrained by available resources. But it is safe to assume that readers and donors will expect ELi to continue to be extraordinary in terms of the quality and depth of reporting it brings.

## 2.4 What ELi readers most value:

On March 10, 2021, ELi's M.E. Emily Joan Elliott and E.D./Publisher Alice Dreger held a public virtual conversation on the topic, "What Should ELi Value?" The decision to hold this conversation came out of a realization that it would be useful to articulate the organization's values to guide the Board and edito-





rial staff, to communicate with existing or potential donors, and to make explicit our “biases.”

The last item was a concern because the editorial staff recognized that, while we say we are “non-partisan,” we do sometimes agitate for particular behaviors on the part of local government, most especially transparency.

In advance of that discussion, we surveyed readers, receiving 79 responses. The result of this survey and of the subsequent discussion confirmed what we have seen in terms of quantitative responses of readers (likes, shares, donations in response to specific pitches) and qualitative (written and oral feedback).

ELi readers value: truth and honesty; ethical behavior; factual accuracy; transparency in government and our work; government that encourages community participation; the right to vote; informed voting; the act of voting; and fair and just treatment by the government.

While a majority of readers believe ELi should track government waste and environmental harms, these were not as high on the “values” ranking as tracking, say, problems with transparency. ELi readers have fairly consistently said they value our watchdog, investigative, and public-meetings reporting more than news on individual persons (obituaries and death notices, exceptional community leadership, etc.) and local public service providers (food banks, mental health resources, etc.).

ELi readers also want to see “trust-enhancing” and do not want to see “trust-diminishing” behaviors by local officials and ELi staff. Many are interested in hearing about community disparities, but they want a distinction between descriptive reporting (which they favor) and journalistic advocacy (which many do not favor for ELi). A strong majority want to see reporting on diverse people but some respondents to questions about this say that it should not be contrived.

ELi readers on the whole want to see coverage that promotes local businesses but that does not shy away from reporting when a local business has a significant problem that impacts the public, for example, when a business engages in a behavior that violates public trust.

When ELi readers are engaged in discussion of the problem that news reporting sometimes harms individuals, they struggle, as the editorial staff does, with how to manage this challenge. They tell us (through surveys or responses to “Your ELi” columns) that they recognize that editorial decision-making on behalf of the community can be really difficult.

For example, as one ELi reader wrote in response

to the early 2021 survey, “Scrutiny of inequities creates urgency for change. And transparency (or the fear of being caught out doing things ‘wrong’) slows things down. I do worry sometimes about the net effect of those two pressures on good people being human while trying to lead (elected leaders but also [governmental] staff).”

In this way, ELi’s readers recognize that our reporting is not neutral in effect, and they want to see ELi’s leaders take that responsibility very seriously. Historically, the ELi system works best when editors are communicative about tough decisions through “Your ELi” columns and readers’ criticisms and concerns are taken seriously.

## 2.5 History of revenue and expenses:

ELi’s fiscal year runs July 1 - June 30, and Appendix A shows ELi’s revenues and expenses for the eight fiscal years so far completed (July 1, 2014, through June 30, 2022). Following the practice of the IRS, ELi’s fiscal years are labeled according to the starting year. So, for example, FY21 refers to the period running from July 2021 through June 2022. ELi just started FY22, our ninth fiscal year.

We are herein generally showing and discussing income and expenses by FY rather than calendar year because ELi’s revenue generation peaks during the year-end period running from November through January, with NewsMatch funding (if any) coming to our bank in March. If we were to display by calendar year, the graphs would not capture the trends of our annual revenue generation cycles.

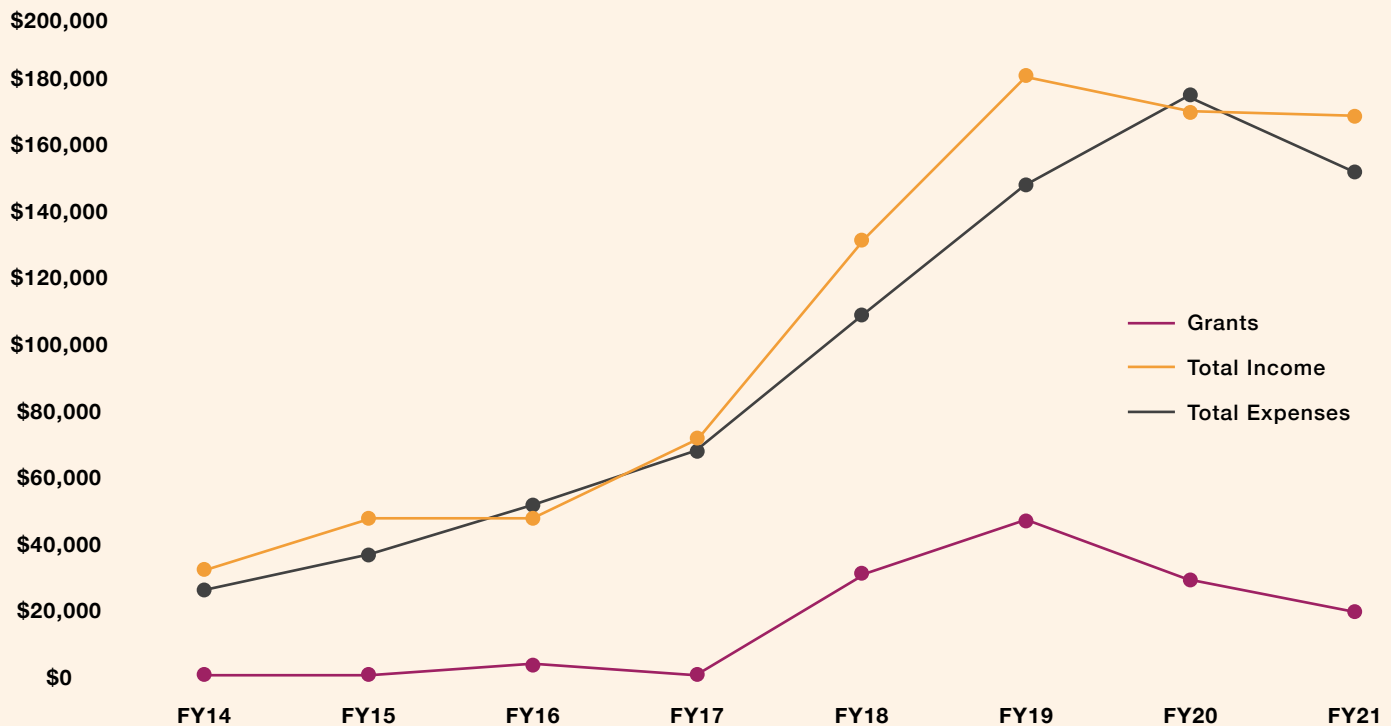


**Refer to the charts on the following pages.**



## ELi Income and Expenses

The following graph shows ELi's total revenue, expenses, and grant income during its eight completed fiscal years (July 2014 through June 2022).



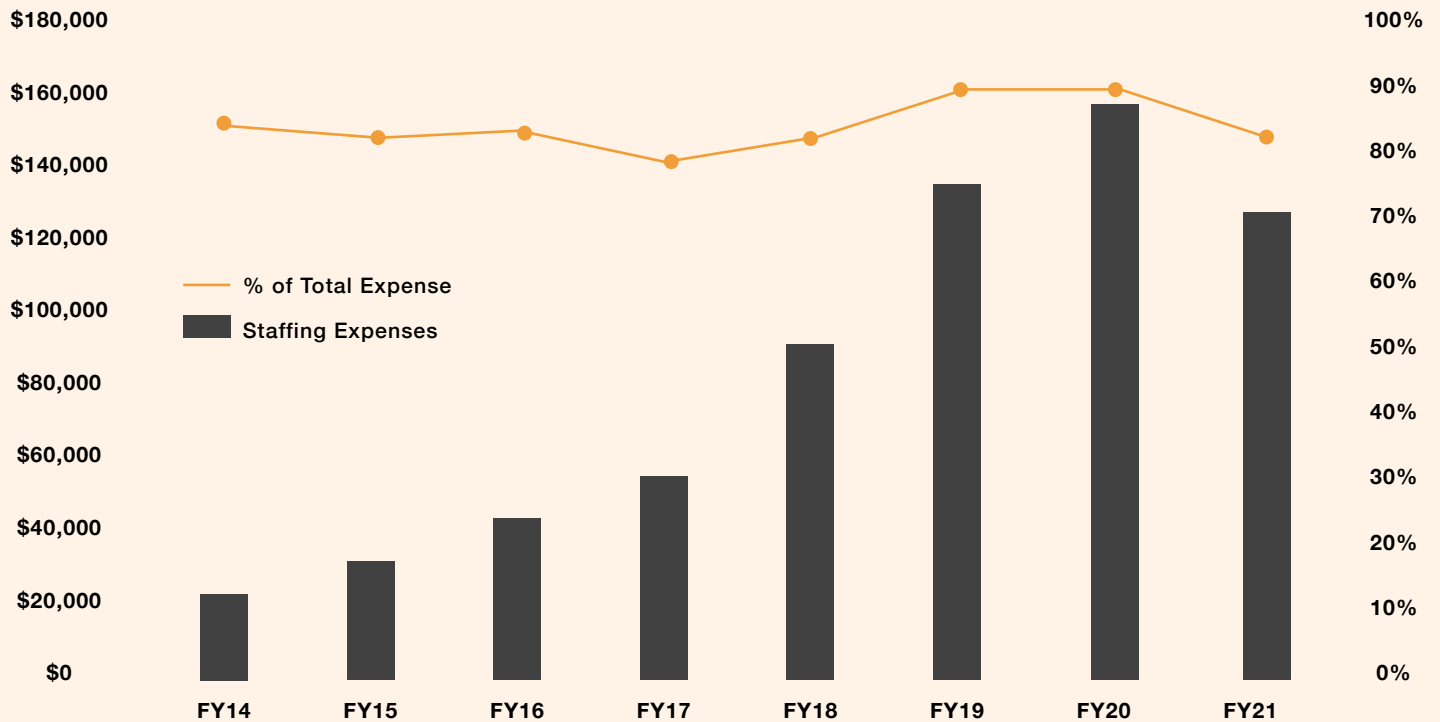
### The following observations can be made about this data:

- Except for FY16 and FY20, ELi has maintained a budget in which expenditures have been kept below revenues. (ELi got through those periods of being “in the red” by using savings accrued.)
- The reason ELi's revenue and expenses increased dramatically from FY17 to FY18 was because founder Alice Dreger started to suffer burnout in FY17 and recognized that without a significant influx of donations that would allow for hiring more paid staff, the organization would not be sustainable. This was the period during which she started the annual Sustainability Campaign, which attempts to raise ELi's annual budget from October - December so that staff can focus on reporting instead of fundraising during most of the year.
- ELi joined the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) and became eligible for NewsMatch grants starting in FY18. At first, NewsMatch made a huge difference in our annual budget and also kickstarted us into a much better methodology for our annual sustainability campaign. But the amount of funds available through NewsMatch has been decreasing as more organizations have joined that program, and the amount available is very unpredictable. (In the last cycle, ELi originally expected to receive only \$10,000 but ultimately received closer to \$19,500 as more money turned out to be available in the end.)
- The substantial drop in expenses in FY21 reflects the significantly reduced staffing expenses caused by the “pause” in reporting starting in May 2022. It should not be understood as meaning that the cost of normal operations has decreased.



## ELi Staffing Expenses

If we hone in on ELi's annual expenses, we can see that the great majority of expenses are consistently staffing costs (salaries, payments for work, payroll taxes, cost of payroll processing). Here's how a graph of that looks:



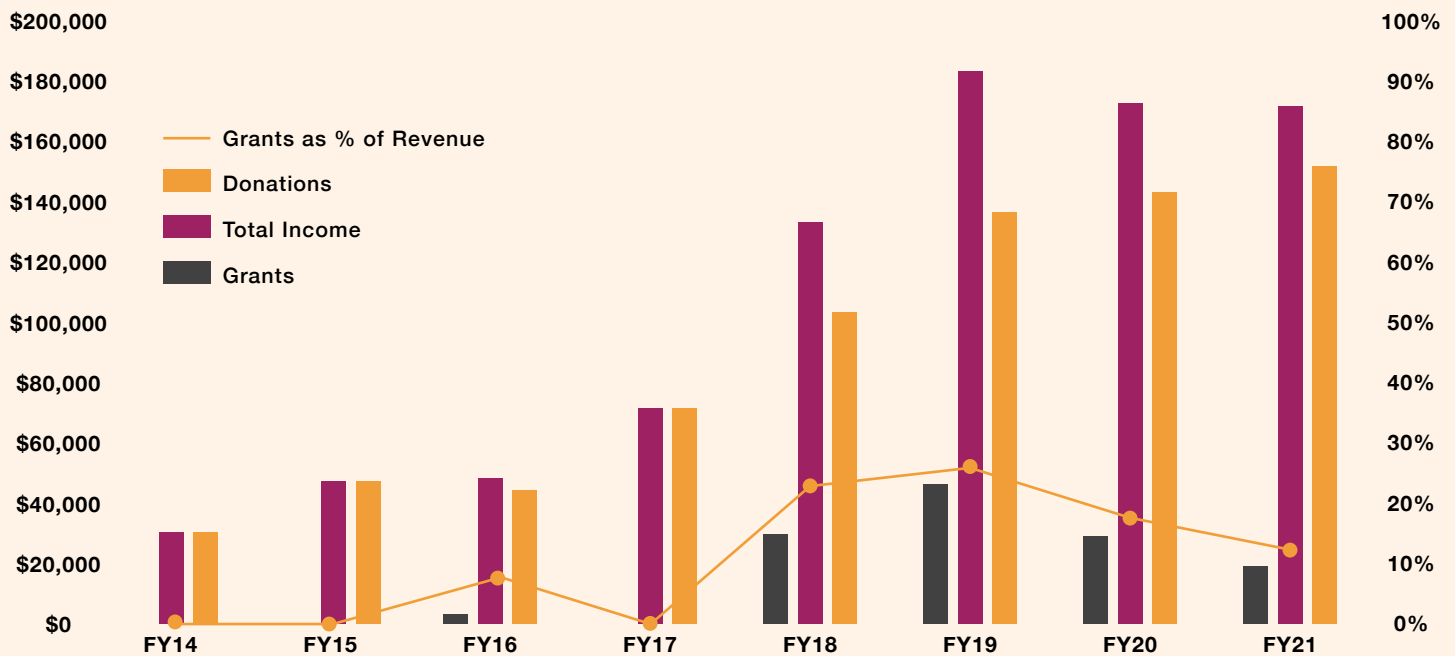
- Again, the drop shown in FY21 should not be misunderstood as staffing costs or expenses decreasing as a trend; that drop occurred because of the laying off of staff for the pause in publishing that started in May 2022; the pause covered the last two months of FY21.





## ELi Revenue Shown by Grants vs. Donations

Now, let's look at ELi's revenue sources more closely:



A major thing to notice about this graph is how individual donor support has steadily increased from FY17 forward, and that's what has made ELi's survival possible, particularly as NewsMatch funding has decreased.

### Here are some numbers to bring context to that donor base:

- Just since 2017, ELi has had a total of over 1,200 individual donors.
- In the last full calendar year (2021), about half of ELi's income from donations (\$81,921) came from 648 donors who gave less than \$1,000, and about half (\$80,301) came from 42 donors who gave \$1,000 or more.
- The number of individual donors has steadily increased every year, with the paper edition producing a notable spike in new donors. While the paper edition costs money to produce and mail, as elaborated upon in the section below on the proposed budget, it appears to have raised well more than it has cost based on the tracking of costs and revenue by General Manager Jodi Spicer.

What about grants? Except for NewsMatch, ELi has rarely managed to obtain grants, and it is not for want of trying. We have applied for funding for our Summer Youth Journalism Program, for individual reporting work, for our website conversion, and more, and we have been turned down steadily.

Part of the problem compared to our sister local organizations is the limited opportunities in our area. Unlike many metro areas in Michigan, the Lansing area has no ultra-wealthy families who

have decided to focus their philanthropic giving locally. The Lansing area has no big collective community foundation, unlike some cities.

Additionally, local companies like the Michigan State University Federal Credit Union (MSUFCU) that support local charitable work typically do not want to touch news organizations like ELi that do hard-hitting investigative reporting. (Indeed, accepting money from a place like MSUFCU could create a challenging conflict of interest for our



reporting, given that we necessarily report on their work in the community.)

In CY21, one local business, Crunchy's, steadily supported ELi at the rate of \$200/month. Local businesses, including the Responsible Hospitality Council, used to provide more support, but that was pre-pandemic and never amounted to a large portion of ELi's budget. Many local business owners do donate as individuals and support ELi with tips and advice. Many of them are very supportive of ELi in terms of their attitudes.

Nationally, philanthropic dollars going to local news have focused understandably on higher-need areas than East Lansing. That said, as the local news crisis becomes more and more recognized nationally, more funding may become available to ELi. But so far, grants other than NewsMatch have not been available to us.

It is worth noting that some other nonprofit news organizations in East Lansing are funded through other means. Local NPR station WKAR is heavily subsidized by MSU, while The State News is heavily subsidized through an annual fee paid by every MSU student unless the student acts specifically to opt-out of the "subscription" fee. The State News also draws income from conventional advertising including ads by political campaigns, sports betting services, bars, landlords, and the like, with the State News allowing its social media accounts to be used as venues for advertising.

While our budget is small comparatively, ELi has actually done spectacularly well in terms of living on support from individual donors compared to other news organizations of our size. That tells us something: ELi really is a community project and is understood as a community asset. It is, as originally intended, effectively "owned" by hundreds of people who live here.

As ELi pursues a relaunch, the Board will have to tackle the problem of how to reawaken the donor base and also find new sources of revenue, whether that be new donors or new methods. Implementing the membership model discussed above in Section 2.2 soon after ELi's relaunch has the potential to begin to generate income quickly.

What we know from experience is that fundraising is hard and very labor intensive. As described in [ELi's Guidance Document](#), the annual Sustainability Campaign is a complex and difficult undertaking. At this point, it is unclear who would undertake it at the end of this year.

It is clear, however, that if ELi is going to survive, fundraising will need to start immediately as operations restart so that ELi does not run out of funds. At

present, ELi has about \$43,000 in savings (because fundraising paused in May, along with reporting), only enough to cover a few months of normal operations. Committed monthly donations are currently running at about \$2,100 per month.

## 2.6 National context:

It seems to us worth explaining ELi's economic struggle within the national context so that readers of this report realize that our situation is not unique except to the extent that it is rather exceptional that ELi managed to deliver so much high-quality news for so long before having to shut down reporting to try to regroup.

As noted above, Alice Dreger founded ELi to fill news gaps in East Lansing and did so against a backdrop of a nationwide local news crisis. The crisis has been caused by the impact of the internet on the journalism economy. Pre-internet, people typically paid directly for access to the news delivered via newspapers. They either bought the newspaper through a store or paid for a subscription. To reach those readers, advertisers paid the newspapers.

The internet created a great disruption as people increasingly expected to get many things without direct pay on the internet, including music, videos, and news. News organizations that shifted to online advertising found that their advertising revenue dropped precipitously because advertisers had more effective and often cheaper ways to reach potential customers. Many readers did not want to pay for online news subscriptions. Paywalls would simply make them turn away.

The result has been widespread and relatively sudden defunding of "legacy" newsrooms. In a just-published open-access article, "Democracy without the Government: The Importance of Local News to Free Speech," commissioned for a volume on *New Directions in the Ethics and Politics of Free Speech*, Dreger notes:

The continuing decline of local news in America has now been well documented, particularly by [Margaret] Sullivan at the Washington Post (Sullivan 2020) and by Penelope Muse Abernathy, Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the University of North Carolina. Abernathy's research has shown that, from 2004 to 2018, the U.S. lost about 1,800 newspapers. By 2018, Abernathy found, "There are hundreds – if not thousands – of communities at risk of becoming iso-



lated news deserts. There are almost 200 of the 3,143 counties in the United States without any paper. An additional 1,449 counties, ranging in size from several hundred residents to more than a million, have only one newspaper, usually a weekly.... The residents of America's emerging news deserts are often its most vulnerable citizens. They are generally poorer, older and less educated than the average American" (Abernathy 2018). Since that study was produced, the Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated the rate of newspapers' demise (Hare 2021).

Researchers have found serious harm to communities that lack dedicated local news organizations. A trio of financial researchers – Pengjie Gao, Chang Lee, and Dermot Murphy – reported in 2020 in the *Journal of Financial Economics* that the loss of a newspaper to a town has a direct financial impact on taxpayers. "Following a newspaper closure, municipal borrowing costs increased by 5-11 basis points, costing the municipality an additional \$650,000 per [bond] issue. This effect is causal and not driven by underlying economic conditions." What's the causal chain? These researchers' "results indicate that local

newspapers hold their governments accountable, keeping municipal borrowing costs low and ultimately saving local taxpayers money." Indeed, Gao et al. noted the issue goes beyond saving personal pocketbooks: "Related academic studies in the political economy space show that geographic areas with reduced local media coverage have less informed voters and lower voter turnouts....removing the incentives of local politicians to work hard on behalf of their constituencies" (Gao et al., 2020).

What has leaked instead into many of the legitimate-news voids is problematic: gossip and unchecked claims shared among neighbors on operations like Nextdoor and Facebook, and operations that claim to be news organizations but that have as their primary mission pushing one political party's agenda or data-collection about readers for revenue generation.

As noted above, in the absence of adequate conventional local journalism, ELi has been a project by which East Lansing residents have tried to bring factual news themselves. But this has not been easy or simple. The project has required an enormous amount of skilled and talented donated and under-paid labor.

When revenue was increased through more effective fundraising and ELi moved the trend towards hiring more staff, it did not reach the point of solving the sustainability problem. In the past as in ELi's possible relaunch, paid (or unpaid) staff may reasonably look to other jobs that might involve better compensation, more prestige, and less stress.

With regard to the issue of stress, we must recognize that bringing local news is really hard. Not only does it require all of the skills of journalism, it also requires extraordinarily thick skin, because the people we irritate with news are people in our own community – often people with whom we want to keep good relations. And because it often irritates or at least inconveniences some people in power, businesses and local philanthropists may not want to engage through financial support, even when they may be morally very supportive.

Every iteration of the ELi project has been hard. Attracting skilled and talented people to participate in this project as core reporting and editing staff – and requiring that they adhere to the very high standards of ELi, particularly in a job market that favors labor – is an extremely difficult endeavor.

**With regard to the issue  
of stress, we must  
recognize that bringing  
local news is really hard.**

*ELi Task Force*

↘  
**A class of the  
Summer Youth  
Journalism Program.**







## SECTION 03

# Recommendations for ELi's Future – Staffing and Budget

### 3.1 Rationale for our staffing recommendation:

In its deliberations, this task force only briefly considered the possibility of returning to the ELi 1.0 model of a mostly volunteer group of reporters producing periodic stories with much less staff support than when ELi stopped publishing in May 2022. The ELi 1.0 method was a much cheaper model, but we believe it would not be sustainable and would also not meet the high expectations that people in the community have come to have of ELi under ELi 2.0.

Consequently, we are proposing to continue with the ELi 2.0 model that will require rebuilding mostly paid staff to produce high-quality reporting and renewing and expanding relationships with existing and potential donors to raise the income to support this. Funding a mostly paid staff is the only model that we believe can be sustainable.

To be frank, creating the post-shut-down relaunch version of ELi 2.0 will be a heavy lift. Many key positions in ELi's staffing infrastructure are currently vacant. At the same time, the labor market means that talented and skilled people have many other opportunities, including outside journalism, which as we have noted above is a stressed and stressful industry.

Additionally, producing local news requires deep local knowledge and thick skin, and it is hard to find and recruit people with those traits. Even when they are recruited, they may reasonably suffer burn-out and be hard to retain as a result.

**If the community wants to save ELi, it will have to help the people leading ELi find, train, and support many new staff.**

Community members interested in being considered for positions or providing advice or other types of assistance can use the [online survey](#) we have created to triage offers. Section 5 of this report describes many ways supportive members of the community can help and provides another link to [that survey](#).

### 3.2 Division of labor and responsibilities:

As discussed above in sections 2.2 and 2.3, ELi has learned from years of experience what Board and staff roles are required to publish local news and administer a non-profit organization that supports it. The [ELi Guidance Document](#), "Part 3: Organizational Structure of ELi," composed in 2021 by Alice Dreger, Emily Joan Elliott, and Jodi Spicer, provides important details about the specific responsibilities of each of these roles.

We have organized positions described in the Guidance Document into three groups:

#### 1. Board of Directors (fiduciary oversight):

- President (legally required)
- Vice President
- Treasurer (legally required)
- Secretary (legally required)
- Public Editor
- Directors at Large

#### 2. News reporting and production:

- Managing Editor (oversees news production)
- News reporting: Reporters, Sub-editors, Photojournalists, Data analyst, FOIA tracker
- News dissemination: Social Media Manager, Proofer, Newsletter Prepper, and Designer

#### 3. ELi corporate administrative staff:

- Executive Director/Publisher (manages non-profit corporation as CEO)
- General Manager, Tech Manager(s), and Donor Relations Manager

ELi's Board of Directors appoints the Executive Director/Publisher, who hires, fires, and manages the remaining staff. The Managing Editor is in charge of news reporting – including planning, writing, editing, and distributing news stories. ELi's reporting is the product that is visible to the East Lansing community and that we are trying to bring back, but it is crucial to understand that all the functions listed above are necessary to relaunch ELi and successfully keep that news organization running.



### 3.3 Current status of ELi's staffing:

As described more above and below, ELi has been without people in many critical positions since May, including Executive Director/Publisher, Managing Editor, Donor Relations Manager, and Social Media Manager. We also lack a core reporting staff.

The **Board of Directors** also lost two members in May 2022, leaving it with only three members. As of our writing in late July 2022, the board is now back up to five people. Board members have been doing a great deal of work this summer with the goal of relaunching news reporting as soon as possible.

As noted above, Alice Dreger has agreed to act as Interim Executive Director for five hours/week, assisted by ELi's paid staff and an Implementation Team made up of volunteers and staff. A search will need to be done for a long-term **Executive Director**, but this does not have to be accomplished before ELi can return to reporting.

The Managing Editor (M.E.) is the central staff person who must be in place in order to relaunch ELi's news reporting. The Board quickly acted on the Task Force's preliminary recommendation to give priority to fill this position, and candidates will be interviewed soon.

Of course, **reporters** are also necessary. These people must be recruited, interviewed, trained, and assigned to specific news beats. Some previous ELi reporters may be interested in returning to these roles, but there is not yet a group of five-to-seven reporters that we believe are needed.

Realistically, ELi cannot interview candidates for reporting positions without having at least a strong possibility of being able to hire a Managing Editor. Better would be having that person in place to do the interviewing along with the E.D. or others from ELi. While interviews for the M.E. position are soon to be underway, ELi has begun letting people know we are seeking reporters as well.

ELi has been very fortunate to have two highly-qualified staff remain in their absolutely crucial positions during this time of turmoil and transition: Jodi Spicer as **General Manager** and Morgan Lees as **Tech Manager**. They have done an exceptional job in their roles, with Morgan Lees aided voluntarily by Lisa Lees (more in prior years than currently). Morgan Lees has voluntarily served on this Task Force. Spicer has been having to deal with the very challenging lack of an E.D./Publisher during most of the period since ELi's reporting stopped.

Having stability at the administrative and technological core of ELi will help make it possible to undertake the enormous challenge of recruiting new people for the other positions of both highly visible leadership as well as the behind-the-scenes, day-to-day work that goes into producing high-quality news reporting. But the challenge is made even greater because of the need to move as quickly as possible to close the gap in providing news about East Lansing and to renew ELi's connections with its readers and donors.

Community members interested in being considered for positions or looking to provide advice or other types of assistance can use our dedicated survey for offers of assistance.

### 3.4 Staffing needs:

The **Executive Director/Publisher** (E.D.) of ELi functions as CEO of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, providing legal and financial oversight to the corporation and global oversight of content. The E.D. is responsible to the Board of Directors and this is the only staff position the Board directly controls in terms of hiring and firing.

For most of ELi's existence, Alice Dreger filled the E.D./Publisher role as a volunteer. That shifted circa 2020 as the Board recognized the need to build into the budget some pay for that role if there was hope of transitioning it away from Dreger (as she wanted). She was then paid \$1,000 per month for that work, a sum that would be much too low to attract someone who wants this as a paying job.

Responsibilities of the E.D. include: with the help of the General Manager, managing the financial and legal needs of the corporation; consulting with the Board on regular and extraordinary operations; keeping up with tax requirements, state corporation requirements, employment, and legal issues; overseeing and collaborating with all of the ELi administrative staff to support and review their work; dealing with personnel problems; keeping track of policies and implementation of policies; with the staff and Board, raising funds needed for ELi's operation; monitoring and adjusting expenditures; and connecting with sister organizations, including through professional development opportunities.

While the job is part-time as currently conceived – because the General Manager and Donors Relations Manager would continue to take on much of the work normally accorded to an E.D. in a small organization – it is an extremely important position. This person is the boss of the organization. You can't have an organization running without a boss.



It is worth noting that while ELi has had four very good Managing Editors (Smitty Smith, Ann Graham Nichols, Alice Dreger, and Emily Joan Elliott), ELi has never managed to find someone other than Dreger to do the job of E.D. for more than a couple of months. Searching for a long-term E.D. remains essential. The description and compensation for this position will be contingent on other staff who are hired and funds that are raised within the first few months after ELi's relaunch.

As noted above, ELi has been benefiting from having in Jodi Spicer an outstanding part-time General Manager at the rate of \$35/hour. The Task Force recommends that ELi work hard to retain Spicer as she is exceptionally good at this job and would be very hard to replace.

At ELi, the General Manager handles ELi's employment and financial infrastructures and supports corporate operations. The G.M. handles all of our donor information (maintaining a critically important database), deals with all of our vendors, bookkeepers, manages payroll, and does a great deal of paperwork for things like the NewsMatch application and required NewsMatch reporting and for our nonprofit postal license. This is the person who keeps the organizational side of ELi running day-to-day. The financial monitoring is especially important.

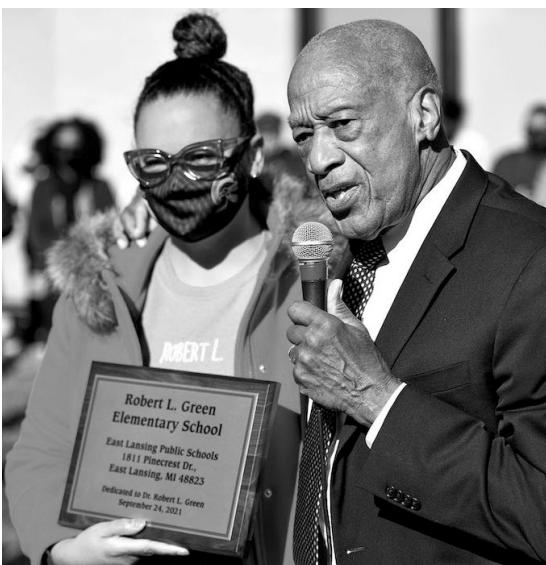
Responsibilities of the GM include: maintaining budgetary records, including monitoring and managing ELi's bank accounts and expenditures and deposits, balancing the accounts several times a month; tracking expenditures by tracking receipts and categorizing expenses; transferring funds from processing agencies and depositing checks;

communicating and managing ELi's relationship with the revenue processing agencies and banks; accounting for all donations and keeping donation spreadsheets up-to-date and secure; managing payroll; receiving payroll net information from payroll service and paying employees; communicating pay information to employees as needed; enrolling new employees with necessary paperwork; handling purchases; maintaining a real-time database showing monthly expenses and revenues by category; handling ELi's post office box, including incoming mail; working with board members and administrative staff on fundraising and other projects as needed; and helping share ELi's methods with sister organizations to promote their success.

ELi's Tech Manager maintains ELi's websites (.news and the archive at .org) and domain-based emails and can be called upon when new technical challenges arise. The ELi website may look simple, but that is because it is very well designed and maintained. (See Appendix B for a sense of how much maintenance the site really requires.)

Responsibilities of the T.M. include: building and maintaining ELi's primary WordPress website; monitoring said website daily to watch for problems; testing and implementing WordPress and plugin updates as they are rolled out; twice a week backing up the production site files and database, and logging into our A2 Hosting cPanel to look for error flags; assisting staff with requests and problems at the website and with domain-based email, including managing user access, altering website function, and updating the website theme; remaining on-call in case a website issue occurs;

News and events  
in East Lansing,  
photographed for ELi.







and keeping a how-to page accessible to logged-in staff which explains how the website works and how to use it.

ELi currently pays one Tech Manager, Morgan Lees, a retainer of \$500/month plus \$100/hour for additional work beyond the expected site maintenance, which has chiefly arisen when website functionality needs to be altered. ELi also currently has a second Tech Manager, Lisa Lees, in a volunteer position; Lisa has increasingly played a supporting role to Morgan. The Task Force recommends that this arrangement continue on relaunch. Morgan and Lisa have done a phenomenal job on tech for ELi since ELi 1.0 and have done so at pay well below market rates. They are a major reason ELi has succeeded. The Task Force recommends ELi work hard to retain them as they would be very hard and expensive to replace.

ELi's **Donor Relations Manager** was a position created circa 2021 as an attempt to do a better job keeping in touch with donors. Elliott took on this position in addition to her job as Managing Editor, being paid \$1,000 per month for this work. It involved, for example, contacting monthly donors whose credit cards expired, leading the year-end Sustainability Campaign, and arranging fundraising events. In most nonprofit organizations, this kind of work is done by a **Development Director**.

As we have already discussed above, ELi's **Managing Editor** (M.E.) has overall responsibility for ELi's news reporting, focused on ELi's day-to-day content published on the [eastlansinginfo.news](http://eastlansinginfo.news) website. Historically, the M.E. has been responsible for editing material, posting material, informing interested individuals of publication, onboarding and offboarding reporting personnel, reporting stories, communicating with the public on Contact Us submissions and emails, managing corrections to stories, etc.

Moving forward, with the aim of keeping the M.E. position part-time and sustainable, the Task Force has recommended that this position keep some of those core responsibilities but that several other responsibilities be moved to other positions within the organization. This new M.E. position will no longer include posting to social media, regularly searching for and onboarding new reporters, personally reporting stories, or managing public communication that originates with the contact page at the website. Proofing and social media posting would be tasks completed by other designated staff members.

Additionally, while the Guidance Document describes the M.E. managing interns, we recommend

that there be no internships for at least a year, if not much longer, because of the cost-to-benefit ratio experienced by ELi with internships.

Because of many of the changes to this position, the Task Force has recommended to the Board that this be a half-time (20 hour/week) position at a pay rate of \$24,000/year. The Task Force believes that, by adopting the proposed limited responsibilities, the position is less likely to lead to burn-out and will be more sustainable for the future success of the organization.

Early in relaunch, ELi will need to have in place a **Social Media Manager** (S.M.M.) who monitors ELi's Facebook and Twitter accounts (public side and direct messaging) and keeps an eye on public relations through those venues, alerting the M.E. and E.D. as deemed necessary. As much as half of ELi's audience accesses the news primarily or exclusively through Facebook, and most public commentary on ELi's work occurs at Facebook, which makes this a necessary position.

Responsibilities for the S.M.M. include: posting to Facebook and Twitter on a schedule established with the M.E.; checking comments on Facebook and on Twitter several times a day, responding when appropriate and referring issues to the M.E. (and possibly E.D.) when necessary; keeping track of which stories are more and less successful based on social media interaction; working with Facebook and Twitter's mysterious algorithms to judge the best time to post stories; when needed, sharing emergency alerts on ELi's social media before an actual story is written; and updating Facebook and Twitter posts as necessary to reflect new developments or significant corrections. (If a S.M.M. task turns out to be particularly sensitive in a given context, the M.E. may take on this work.)

In the past, the job of Social Media Manager has been taken on by someone who also is a reporter or who has some other job, which could happen again. The Task Force recommends that the Social Media Manager be paid a \$400/month retainer on relaunch, as this is an intensive position with odd but frequent hours.

The Task Force considered priorities for hiring **reporters**. Reporters are assigned reporting topics by editors and are responsible for primary fact-checking of their own work. Historically, ELi reporters have covered these news beats: (1) City Council, City government boards and commissions, City operations, and City finances; (2) School Board, other ELPS administrative issues, and public school controversies; (3) local elections, specifically City Council, School Board, 54B District



Court judgeship, and local proposals including millages and land sales; (4) development, Downtown Development Authority (DDA), and the Planning Commission; (5) public safety including policing, emergencies, and public health; (6) arts, cultures, and small local businesses; (7) parks and recreation; (8) environment; and (9) sports, chiefly East Lansing High School (ELHS) sports.

When ELi relaunches, the Task Force recommends giving priority to the first five of these beats. City government reporting is generally the topic in which ELi readers express the most interest. Also, ELi's highly-valued investigative and in-depth stories have been largely in the areas of government, development, and policing. In election seasons, ELi reporting on political races, campaign financing, and ballot questions specific to East Lansing has been highly valued as well.

Arts and culture and small businesses are good balance topics to government stories, informing residents of things to enjoy in East Lansing, so this type of reporting should occur as possible. We recommend dropping coverage of high school sports because it is one of the few topics covered by other media outlets and it takes a fair amount of time (and thus expense) to report.

Reporters will need to be recruited. This may be challenging. Many City government and local development and finance stories require some background or immersion to report with the context that makes them meaningful.

Good writing skills are needed for all reporters, even if this does not include specific experience as a journalist. For five years, ELi has hired Cody Harrell,

the journalism teacher at ELHS who now also serves on ELi's Board, to run our Summer Youth Journalism Program. He has been asked now to create a series of online videos to assist adults as well as young people in learning specific skills needed for ELi reporting. We believe these videos will also help our sister nonprofit local news organizations.

The Task Force recommends that a contract with reporters be developed that will spell out requirements for reporters – such as factual, non-editorial writing – and that will clarify when someone may represent themselves as an ELi reporter. ELi will seek to recruit both people wanting to report for pay and volunteer reporters.

The compensation for reporting will begin at the same level as previously used in 2022. As noted at [our “reporting” page](#): “For a very simple story, like a short (400-word) report about an upcoming event, we pay \$50-75, depending on the amount of background work required. For a report about a local issue or event that has, say, one in-depth interview and is about 700-800 words, we typically pay \$100. For covering a major story at a meeting, we pay \$125, or \$150 if we get an overnight-turn-around. (We also pay more if the meeting required many hours of watching.) For investigative pieces, we pay more.”

Again, community members who are interested in offering themselves for staffing positions including for reporting can use our special [online survey](#) to indicate interest.

**Editors** are designated by the M.E. and have overall responsibility for editing reporters' work. Topical editors are created on an ad hoc basis to

↘  
**Scenes around  
East Lansing,  
photographed for ELi.**





manage and produce content in a specific area. They may be reporters in their own areas and handle, to some degree, story assignment in those areas. (When one of them reports, at least one other person edits that work.) They are also the secondary fact-checkers for reporters' work in their areas.

On relaunch, the Task Force recommends that the M.E. develop a plan for how editors will work with the M.E. and reporters.

The Task Force further recommends the creation of an **Editorial Board**, to consist of the M.E., frequent editors, and lead reporters on several beats (if different than frequent editors). The Editorial Board would then propose stories that should be covered as well as edit and proofread stories that are written. This will aid in the sustainability of the editorial positions and help to provide quality-control in terms of content.

In the last several years, ELi has also had a **Community Advisory Board** (C.A.B.). The Task Force recommends that the new ELi editorial staff address how best to reawaken the C.A.B.

### 3.5 A note on sustainability of staff:

As noted in Section 2, local news in America is a wounded industry in which publishers struggle constantly with trying to bring solid reporting in a revenue-poor economy. ELi faces the same struggle as it tries to repopulate the staffing.

Money alone won't solve our staffing problems because there is no way we can pay enough to keep people who will reasonably seek jobs with less stress, better compensation, and higher prestige. Even if we had a lot of funding to draw upon, even if the labor market were not so tight right now, it would be very challenging to find people who have the depth of knowledge to bring the news here in context.

The only logical way to look at sustainable staffing for ELi is to seek people who are interested in the project because they have a calling to it. But even then, it may be difficult to find people who can deliver the news with the dedication and attention ELi readers have come to expect.

### 3.6 Budget Guesstimate for 12 months:

The budget estimate presented below is a minimum of what the Task Force believes is needed for ELi's relaunch. This shows total annual expenses of approximately \$141,000, not counting liability insurance should the Board seek that. This compares to approximately \$190,000 annual expenses at the time ELi ceased reporting in May 2022.

This budget estimate is for a somewhat lower annual expense total than last year's was (with full operations in place) for the following reasons:

1. No money is allocated to pay an Executive Director, which will ultimately not be sustainable.
2. News reporters and sub-editors are shifted to pay on a W-9/1099 (independent contractor) basis rather than a W-2/W-4 (employee) basis, lowering payroll expenses.
3. News reporting is estimated at about five articles per week, whereas early this year ELi was publishing approximately ten articles per week. Doubling the reporting cost in the budgeted amount would be an increase of \$31,250. Also, if those people were paid as employees rather than independent contractors, the cost increase would go up another 15%.
4. Print editions are excluded. They cost about \$2,100 per edition plus (minimal) editing and proofing labor, and we estimate that they increased income by about \$30,000/year in the time we were producing them.
5. No expenses are included for the weekly podcast as it is not planned to be re-launched.

Note also that this estimated budget includes no health insurance for any staff (which can be estimated at a cost of approximately \$200/month per person if ELi compensates for the cost of an individual employee buying into the ACA marketplace).

## 12 Month Budget Estimate

The budget estimate presented below is a minimum of what the Task Force believes is needed for ELi's relaunch.

\* Indicates 15% is added to estimated pay for payroll taxes as these would be W2 employees

### INTERNAL STAFFING COSTS

<b>Executive Director*</b>	\$0	Will go up when no longer a volunteer
<b>Managing Editor*</b>	\$27,600	Assumes \$24,000/year + 15% payroll taxes
<b>General Manager*</b>	\$17,250	Estimate from Jodi Spicer, including payroll taxes
<b>Tech Manager*</b>	\$8,050	Assumes no work on moving from Largo in this year but extra work dealing with onboarding new website users; includes payroll taxes
<b>Social Media Manager*</b>	\$5,520	Assumes \$400/month + 15% payroll taxes
<b>Donor Relations Manager*</b>	\$13,800	Assumes \$1,000/month + 15% payroll taxes
<b>Reporters (1099)</b>	\$31,250	This assumes 5 articles/week, 50 weeks, \$125/each (less than ELi had been publishing)
<b>Editing help (1099?)</b>	\$5,000	Assumes 2 articles/week, 50 weeks, \$50 each cost
<b>Photojournalists (1099)</b>	\$3,600	This assumes some volunteer quality photography
<b>Journalism Educator (1099)</b>	\$2,000	Plan is to hire Cody Harrell for this work
<b>Proofers</b>	\$0	Assuming rolled into editing or reliable volunteers
<b>Paychex (payroll proc.)</b>	\$1,200	Cost of payroll processing

### VENDOR-RELATED COSTS

<b>Quickbooks (accounting software)</b>	\$360	
<b>Mailchimp</b>	\$840	Ghost may be cheaper and better
<b>Zoom</b>	\$200	
<b>Zencaster</b>	\$0	Assumes no podcast recordings
<b>Credit card processing</b>	\$1,000	May be higher depending on how one calculates gross v. net credit card donations

### OTHER COSTS

<b>Ads/promotions including direct mail postage to donors</b>	\$5,000	Could be lower or higher depending on activities. This assumes no paper edition but does assume direct mail to donors a couple of times per year.
<b>Internet hosting/computers</b>	\$1,000	Would be more if we need to supply computer equipment to staff
<b>Accountant for 990</b>	\$500	Historically staff have completed the 990 returns with minimal accounting assistance costing about \$500/year
<b>Liability insurance</b>		ELi does not currently have this. There may be discounted opportunities available via professional organizations.
<b>Professional Organization membership</b>	\$400	LION Publishers and Institute for Nonprofit News (INN)
<b>FOIA &amp; other reporting expenses</b>	\$750	
<b>Office supplies</b>	\$1,500	
<b>Designer help</b>	\$1,000	Needed for donation-attracting work
<b>approx. 10% cushion</b>	\$13,000	For unpredicted expenses (safety cushion)

**ESTIMATE TOTAL** **\$140,820**





## SECTION 04

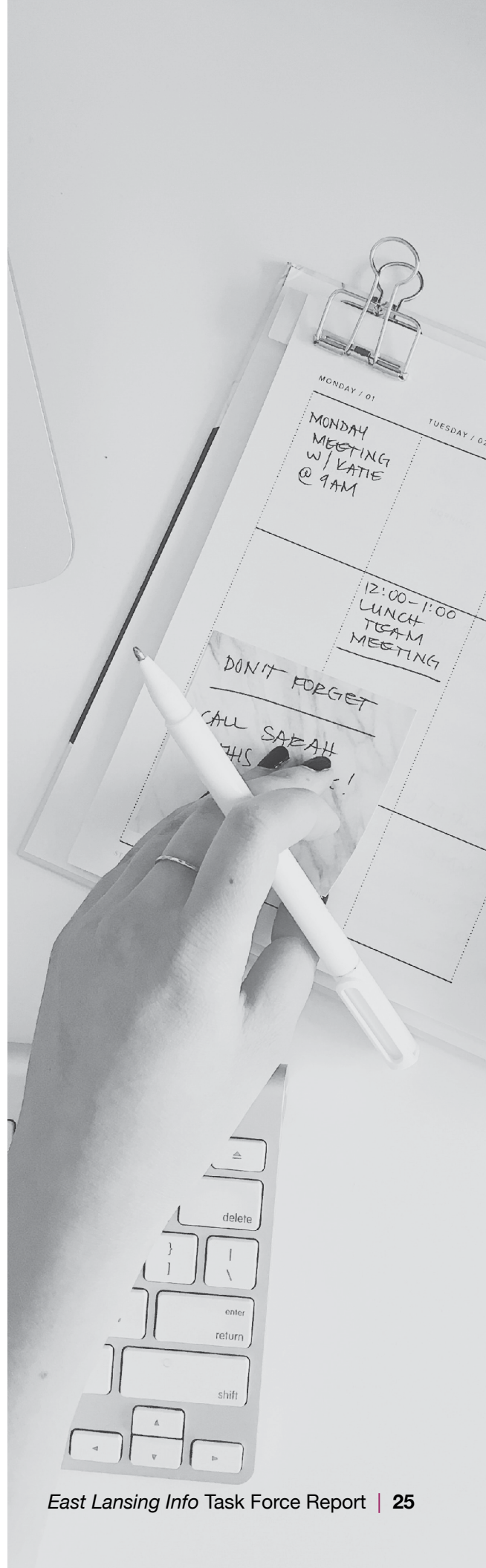
# Relaunch Work Plan

Relaunching East Lansing Info in the fall of 2022 requires restarting regular, high-quality news reporting. It also requires conducting a year-end fundraising sustainability campaign; there is simply no substitute for raising funds at this time of year. Both of these essential functions depend on rebuilding the ELi staff and continuing active support by the Board.

The Task Force recommends that a “membership” model email newsletter (introduced in Section 2.2) should begin as soon as possible. “Members” (i.e., donors who contribute a stated minimum dollar figure per year) will receive ELi reporting sooner than it will become generally available for free on our website, while keeping all ELi reporting ultimately available for free to everyone.

Starting the membership system as soon as possible will enable supporters to begin to make donations that will help pay for staff needed for the relaunch even before the year-end fundraising campaign. It will also introduce ELi readers and supporters to this new way to donate that will continue during the sustainability fundraising in November and December.

As should be evident, this is a rapid, highly ambitious work plan. To try to make it clearer, below we provide a checklist with notations about who is responsible and deadlines that can be used as a reference by both staff and the Board. An accompanying bird’s-eye view of the six-month timeline appears in Appendix E.





## East Lansing Info work plan, August 1, 2022 - January 31, 2023

TASK	TIME PERIOD	NOTES
<b>0. Task Force Report &amp; Recommendations</b>		Began June 25
0.1 Present Task Force report to Board	July 25	
0.2 Publish ELi article about report	July 29	
<b>1. Hire staff managers</b>		
1.1 Appoint Interim Executive Director (E.D.)	July 25	Alice Dreger accepted this volunteer position for 5 hours/week
1.2 Recruit people to be part of Implementation Team	July 26 -	Volunteers and staff are to form the Implementation Team
1.3 Recruit and hire Managing Editor (M.E.)		
1.3a Publish ELi article, job description, other publicity for M.E. position	July 15	
1.3b Interview & vet M.E. candidate(s)		
1.3c Hire M.E. & set start date		Prepare written contract
1.3d Train new M.E.		The extent of this task depends on the person's experience
1.4 Hire Social Media Manager	August	Needed when ELi is publishing; may be someone also in another role, such as a reporter, and could be interim
1.5 Recruit and appoint Executive Director (E.D.)		Half-time position, volunteer or paid
1.5a Decide on long-term E.D. job description		Depends partly on whether a Donor Relations Manager (DRM) is hired



1.5b	Publicize E.D. position		Publish ELi story & post to social media; network to look for candidates
1.5c	Interview & vet E.D. candidates		
1.5d	Appoint E.D.		Prepare written contract or agreement
1.5e	Train new E.D.		The extent of this task depends on the person's experience
<b>2. Recruit, hire and train reporters</b>		August	5-7 core reporters needed to start; see Section 3.4 about news beats
2.1	Publicize reporter jobs; contact / recruit potential reporters	Started in July	Need dedicated article and posts about this
2.2	Interview possible reporters		
2.3	Hire reporters for news beats		Prepare written expectations / contract; may be paid or unpaid, short- or long-term
2.4	Onboard reporters		Use " <a href="#">Resources for Our Reporters</a> " and material from Cody Harrell
<b>3. Relaunch news reporting</b>			
3.1	Identify & convene Editorial Board (E.B.)		Some E.B. members may be reporters
3.2	Plan launch; assign stories		
3.3	Publish first stories	after Labor Day?	Labor Day is Sept. 5
3.4	Publish investigative story	circa Nov. 1	
3.5	Continue to publish stories	Sept. -	



3.6	Plan & publish election coverage	Sept. - Oct.	Absentee ballots available Sept. 29; election day is Nov. 8
3.7	Publish 2nd investigative story	December	
<b>4. Establish membership newsletter</b>		July - Aug.	This is already being worked on by the Tech Manager and Interim E.D.
<b>5. Sustainability fundraising campaign</b>			
5.1	Plan fundraising campaign	September	See <a href="#">ELi Guidance Document, Appendix N</a> , "ELi's Fundraising Explainer," for additional timeline and details
5.2	Set fundraising goal	September	E.D. and G.M.
5.3	Contact previous Core Donors		E.D., D.R.M., and Board
5.4	Solicit "Why I Report for ELi" reports	October	M.E. & reporters
5.5	Communicate with INN re. NewsMatch	Sept. - October	G.M., ELi submitted NewsMatch application to INN on June 28; INN likely to decide by end of September
5.6	Prepare article & graphic(s) launching campaign	October	M.E. and E.D. and/or D.R.M.
5.7	Publish article launching campaign	Nov. 1	
5.8	Publish weekly updates on fundraising campaign & graphic showing progress	Nov. - Dec.	M.E. with G.M. and E.D. help
5.9	Prepare letters to selected former donors	October	E.D. and G.M. oversee
5.10	Print, stuff, and send letters	early Nov.	G.M. facilitates, E.D. directs
5.11	Send thank you notes	Nov -Dec.	E.D. directs





5.12	Write pitch for Giving Tuesday	Nov. 29	E.D.
5.13	Publish article on accomplishments since relaunch	December	M.E. and E.D.
5.14	Send email messages to people who have not given yet	Dec. 26-30	G.M. directs
5.15	Announce fundraising results	Early Jan.	E.D. and G.M.
5.16	Annual report & INN report	January	G.M.



## SECTION 05

# How You Can Help the Relaunch

There are many ways people in the community can help ELi! And ELi needs that help to succeed at a relaunch.

We have prepared a quick [survey](#) that lists the kinds of assistance ELi needs at this time, from staff positions we need to fill to volunteer tasks.

Our main staff need at this time is for reporters, particularly people interested in covering City government or East Lansing Public Schools. Please see our [page about reporting](#) to figure out if you are interested and qualified. You do not have to have training or experience in journalism to join our team. We have found that the best reporters are people who are solid writers and excellent listeners with a serious dedication to the value of nonpartisan news reporting.

We also will need photographers, proofers, and a social media manager, along with researchers to help our reporters. We're looking, too, for help with survey design and analysis and marketing.

Our other critical need is in the area of raising funds. There are many ways people can help, from sending a donation, to holding a house party

fundraiser, to helping to organize a 5K run/walk this fall, to providing a matching donation commitment, to stuffing envelopes during the year-end fundraising campaign so we can reconnect with the more than 1,000 people in the community who have been ELi supporters.

We also have a staff position open for Donor Relations Manager (or Development Director). We're also looking for a volunteer coordinator.

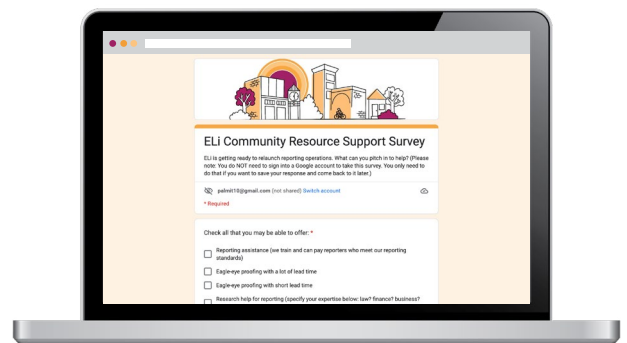
You can also be an "ELi Ambassador" when ELi relaunches its reporting. You can commit to sharing important ELi stories on Facebook if you are active there, or you can encourage your friends to sign up for ELi's email newsletter.



## HAVE A MINUTE?

# Take the Survey

We are eager to reconnect with you, so please respond to the [survey](#) to tell us how you can help!





## Appendices

- 32 | APPENDIX A:** ELi's Revenue and Expenses Shown by Fiscal Year
- 33 | APPENDIX B:** Transition of ELi's Website Away from the Largo WordPress Theme
- 34 | APPENDIX C:** Consideration of a Ghost-Based Membership Newsletter
- 35 | APPENDIX D:** Opportunities Worth Considering in the Longer-Term
- 36 | APPENDIX E:** Overview Timeline of ELi Relaunch, Including Year-End Fundraising



## APPENDIX A

# ELI's Revenue and Expenses Shown by Fiscal Year

	FY14	FY15	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21
INCOME								
Donation	\$30,841.62	\$47,025.60	\$44,296.36	\$71,372.32	\$102,706.33	\$135,877.15	\$142,437.82	\$151,014.64
Grants	\$0.00	\$500.00	\$3,600.00	\$0.00	\$30,000.00	\$46,200.00	\$29,200.00	\$19,487.18
Other	\$1.95	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$16.12	\$57.72	\$5.19
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$30,843.57</b>	<b>\$47,525.60</b>	<b>\$47,896.36</b>	<b>\$71,372.32</b>	<b>\$132,706.33</b>	<b>\$182,093.27</b>	<b>\$171,695.54</b>	<b>\$170,507.01</b>
EXPENSES								
Advertising & Promotion	\$506.73	\$2,302.12	\$4,021.30	\$9,666.18	\$10,405.99	\$2,672.90	\$2,293.40	\$1,601.12
Business Fees	\$1,184.67	\$1,586.64	\$1,333.24	\$1,978.66	\$2,658.25	\$2,542.38	\$4,772.54	\$975.18
Computer and Internet Services	\$824.81	\$279.63	\$373.99	\$5.00	\$1,550.13	\$457.59	\$1,482.13	\$953.33
Contracted Services	\$3,602.50	\$12,245.00	\$15,227.50	\$15,237.50	\$16,440.00	\$22,863.00	\$15,489.64	\$8,968.75
Dues to Professional Organizations	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$150.00	\$251.03	\$580.68	\$316.84	\$325.00	\$500.00
Payroll Expenses	\$1,856.98	\$1,552.46	\$2,164.36	\$3,474.18	\$6,007.75	\$8,873.23	\$10,867.17	\$15,093.21
Salaries	\$16,225.00	\$16,675.00	\$24,600.00	\$35,342.00	\$67,920.87	\$102,292.50	\$130,082.39	\$102,232.50
Reporting Expenses	\$0.00	\$119.87	\$66.70	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$388.88	\$749.39	\$950.83
FOIA	\$703.02	\$24.00	\$20.99	\$443.96	\$1,176.70	\$1,593.20	\$328.32	\$555.64
Postage	\$207.40	\$410.95	\$463.33	\$253.30	\$924.97	\$2,318.31	\$3,432.89	\$7,005.57
Office Supplies	\$347.46	\$617.13	\$421.26	\$176.36	\$542.57	\$3,218.13	\$1,071.75	\$1,378.80
Professional Development	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$190.00	\$124.95	\$95.00	\$0.00	\$167.00	\$90.00
Professional Fees	\$520.00	\$1,110.18	\$1,210.00	\$1,140.00	\$735.00	\$1,735.00	\$1,355.00	\$3,221.97
Paper Edition	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$2,836.44	\$8,710.83
Other	\$0.00	\$132.00	\$595.90	\$467.20	\$1,041.01	\$500.59	\$498.62	\$775.61
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$25,978.57</b>	<b>\$37,054.98</b>	<b>\$50,838.57</b>	<b>\$68,560.32</b>	<b>\$110,078.92</b>	<b>\$149,772.55</b>	<b>\$175,751.68</b>	<b>\$153,013.34</b>
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>\$4,865.00</b>	<b>\$10,470.62</b>	<b>(\$2,942.21)</b>	<b>\$2,812.00</b>	<b>\$22,627.41</b>	<b>\$32,320.72</b>	<b>(\$4,056.14)</b>	<b>\$17,493.67</b>





## APPENDIX B

# Transition of ELi's Website Away From the Largo WordPress Theme

---

### B.1 Background:

Replacing our original Drupal-platform website, [ELi's WordPress website](#) was built to run on the Largo theme from the Institute for Non-profit News (INN). This theme was chosen because it was free for INN members such as ELi and because it looked easy to modify to suit our needs.

However, soon after ELi's switch to WordPress and Largo was completed in 2020, the Largo theme became unsupported. There have been several times that our Tech Manager Morgan Lees has had to patch the theme herself when things didn't work correctly, and as WordPress continues to be updated but the Largo theme does not, these instances are likely to increase rather than decrease.

One key functionality of Largo, the 'Series' function – used for ongoing special series such as ELi's COVID-19 reporting, Your ELi, Ann About Town, and Spend Locally – is already unstable.

### B.2 Solution:

ELi's Tech Manager will need to select and implement a new theme for the ELi website based on the input of ELi staff. The alternative is to take over maintenance of the Largo theme, which will be work- and cost-intensive.

### B.3 Expected Work/Cost Involved:

It's difficult to estimate before doing any research on other themes, which has been postponed due to the ongoing crisis at ELi, but a rough estimate can nevertheless be formed based on previous theme changes and the work those entailed.

A total of 25 hours styling and testing the Largo theme were logged in Spring of 2020, working out to \$2,500 spent. There is a good chance that

switching to a new theme would take less time, particularly if the theme already has several features that had to be coded into Largo by Morgan Lees. (The dual-column layout for "Special ELi Reporting" and "In the Community" as well as the category tag imposed over the images in that section had to be manually coded.) It is safe to assume that this could take as many as 30 paid hours, but it is more likely to take fewer.

A small one-time additional cost (in the range of \$50-\$100) could be incurred if a theme is chosen that is not free; the upside to this is that paid themes are more likely to be feature-rich and well-maintained, thus necessitating less coding work from ELi's Tech Manager.

### B.4 Proposed Timeline:

As of yet, Largo is acceptably stable save for some occasional issues with the 'Series' function. Therefore, this is not an urgent problem, and could easily be pushed back at least a year and possibly further. (The timing is difficult to predict because if a major WordPress update should break something in Largo's code, it will change.)

The broad steps will be:

- identify key features of the current theme that need to be kept;
- begin search for new theme (paid or unpaid);
- run theme past ELi managing staff;
- update the first of ELi's two mirrored test sites with the new theme;
- get theme looking good on that test site, making code modifications if necessary;
- gain approval from ELi managing staff, make changes if needed;
- implement new theme on other mirrored test site, then on the live site.

Step one, identifying key features, could begin any time, but it is Morgan Lees' recommendation that this wait until we have a new Managing Editor and permanent Executive Director/Publisher in place as those people ought to be consulted.



## APPENDIX C

# Consideration of a Ghost-Based Membership Newsletter

### C.1 Pricing:

Ghost is a nonprofit, open-source platform for newsletters, similar to Substack but with a number of better features, including lower cost to use.

Ghost is free to try for the first 14 days, and after this trial period one is prompted to either choose a paid tier or delete the account. ELi Tech Manager Morgan Lees will be setting up an account for themselves to see how it looks once there is a list of questions from ELi's team for them to answer about the possible use.

Ghost offers several tiers, all of which can be paid on a monthly or yearly basis. Only the lowest two options would make sense for ELi at relaunch; other options could be considered after ELi stabilizes. Price scales upward with the number of members for each tier. Note that for pay structure purposes Ghost counts all subscribers, paid or not, as members (elsewhere the language used is that 'subscribers' are unpaid and 'members' are paid).

The lowest level (Starter) begins at \$108/year and maxes out at \$180/year with 1,000 members. It is limited to 1 staff user per account and only allows use of the unaltered free official themes for Ghost.

The second lowest level (Creator) begins at \$300/year. With 10,000 members the cost ramps up to \$1188/year. It is limited to 2 staff users per account, allows editing of free themes and use of custom themes, and maxes out at 400,000 members – safely more than ELi would ever have, given that would be nearly ten times the total number of East Lansing residents.

### C.2 Members / Member Payments:

It is easy to send posts out to free subscribers, paid members, or paid members at specific tiers. One can set out specific benefits for different membership tiers, but it doesn't seem that ELi would be interested in doing that. Membership is

offered either monthly or annually and the cost can be set (most examples use \$5 or \$10/month with a discount for an annual subscription).

Ghost uses Stripe for payments, accepts all major credit and debit cards, and does not accept PayPal.

### C.3 Scope of Ghost:

The Task Force only recommends using Ghost as a newsletter, but Ghost offers tools for building a website and embedding a fairly large array of other features into that website. [The Atlantic](#) is an example of a news organization using Ghost for something similar to what the Task Force proposes doing, whereas other examples given by Ghost in their overview (<https://bklyner.com/>, etc.) are using it as a full light website.

### C.4 Themes and Customization:

Ghost offers a modest array of free themes. There are also paid themes available, much like with Drupal, WordPress, or any other Content Management System (CMS). At every tier but the lowest, there is also the possibility of altering or creating the theme.

Once Lees has made a free account, they will check around and see if there are any free themes for Ghost that would be easily altered to suit ELi's branding.

### C.5 Miscellaneous:

Ghost offers multiple staff accounts for each newsletter/website on all tiers but the lowest one. The newsletter could be maintained by a single individual, a group of individuals using the same shared account, or multiple individuals with separate accounts; the answer to that question will help determine which Ghost tier is best for ELi.

The editor tools appear similar to the ones that WordPress uses, which should mean that whomever is in charge of the newsletter doesn't have to learn a new process.



## APPENDIX D

# Opportunities Worth Considering in the Longer-Term

When ELi is able to publish regular news reporting on its website, using social media and email for dissemination, it can consider ways to expand. Here are three possibilities discussed by the Task Force:

### D.1 Multimedia news distribution:

ELi's paper news product was considered a valuable addition by several segments of the East Lansing Community, including older residents and students at MSU. Not only did the print version expand ELi's readership when it was introduced in 2021, it also proved to be an asset for raising funds.

The paper edition contains "the best of" articles published over the previous six weeks to three months, so it does not increase the costs of reporting. Rather, the relatively small impact on the budget comes into play because of dedicated, high-quality graphic design and layout, printing, and postal distribution. We recommend printing one edition during the Sustainability Fundraising campaign in November - December, 2022, and returning to regular production of the paper version approximately six times per year in 2023.

Video segments, particularly short ones, also could help to draw in readership and explain key pieces of news. Accessing news in this format is becoming increasingly popular, but production of high-quality news and explainer videos is resource intensive. More production of videos is something ELi may wish to consider in the future.

ELi was pleased to partner with Impact 89FM, the MSU student radio station, to produce a weekly audio podcast starting in June 2021. However, the Task Force does not recommend launching the podcast again at restart. Having fresh content and people to interview every week to fit into the radio station's weekly schedule was demanding, especially when it was added on top of reporting written stories for ELi. Also, we found that it was more difficult to stick to news coverage and not veer into

editorializing in the audio podcast format, compared to print.

### D.2 Collaborations with other local news organizations:

Paying reporters to research and write about local news is expensive, and more and more local outlets can no longer afford a robust reporting staff. This makes partnerships among news organizations an attractive option, as ELi's goal is to produce and share high quality reporting.

ELi was in talks with WKAR prior to the spring 2022 pause about some exciting ways to collaborate that could provide a wider reach for ELi reporting and better serve both the ELi and WKAR audiences. When ELi's reporting capacity has been rebuilt, the Task Force recommends renewing these discussions with WKAR, a fellow nonprofit, nonpartisan local news provider.

ELi and East Lansing High School's *Portrait* news site have previously begun exploring ways to collaborate. Such collaboration is valuable to ELi because high school students and their families are part of the East Lansing community that ELi tries to serve.

*The Portrait* is now looking to increase its hard news coverage, which could expand reporting by ELHS students that would also be of interest to ELi's broader audience. ELi's Managing Editor could seek a regular system of communication with a liaison from *Portrait* to identify upcoming story ideas of mutual interest.

Such collaboration could be enhanced by having the *Portrait* liaison sit on the ELi Editorial Board. Cooperative development of stories could be organized so that both the writing and one round of editing would occur at *Portrait* before articles come to ELi, to reduce labor needed from ELi. The *Portrait*'s advisor, Cody Harrell, has a five-year relationship with ELi as director of ELi's Summer Youth Journalism Program, and he recently agreed to join the ELi Board. Adan Quan, one of the *Portrait*'s Co-Editors-in-Chief, also serves on ELi's board.



## APPENDIX E

# Overview Timeline of ELi's Relaunch and End-of-Year Fundraising

### Responsibilities:

- Board
- Admin. Staff
- Editor(s) & Reporters

Tasks are placed in week they begin

	Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
	Starting	Jul	Aug	Aug	Aug	Aug	Sep	Sep	Sep	Sep	Oct	Oct	Oct	Oct	Oct	Nov	Nov	Nov
		31	7	14	21	28	4	11	18	25	2	9	16	23	30	6	13	20
1. Staffing	1. Hire staff managers																	
	1.1 Appoint Interim Executive Director																	
	1.2 Establish Implementation Team																	
	1.3 Hire M.E.		Required for 2 and 3															
			1.4 Social Media manager					Depends on 1.3. Required for 3.										
	2. Hire reporters (paid or unpaid)																	
2. Hire & train Reporters			Contact / recruit possible reporters															
			Train reporters		Depends on 1.3													
3. Relaunch Reporting			3. Re-launch news reporting					Depends on 1.1, 1.3, & 2.										
			Plan launch; assign stories															
						Begin reporting after Labor Day (Sept. 5)												
			Continue publishing & social media posts												Continue reporting			
4. Membership Newsletter			4. Set up membership newsletter using Ghost															
					Start membership newsletter													
5. Fundraising						5. Plan fundraising campaign				Depends on 3								
									NewsMatch?									
			Seek matching donations											Formally launch campaign				



Continued on next page



#### Responsibilities:

- Board
- Admin. Staff
- Editor(s) & Reporters

Tasks are placed in week they begin

	Week	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
	Starting	Nov	Dec	Dec	Dec	Dec	Jan	Jan	Jan	Jan	Jan
		27	4	11	18	25	1	8	15	22	29
1. Staffing											
2. Hire & train Reporters											
3. Relaunch Reporting											
			Investigative article		BREAK	Continue reporting					
4. Membership Newsletter											
5. Fundraising											
		Giving Tuesday				Complete campaign					
								Annual report & INN report			

