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What Did It Cost to Run ELi for the First-Half of 2019? ^[1]

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By:

Alice Dreger, Publisher



East Lansing Info (ELi) is our community's nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent news provider. We take donations from readers and turn that money into meaningful news production by employing local people to be reporters, editors, and general support staff ^[2].

It's important to understand that no one "owns" ELi. It is overseen by a volunteer Board of Directors ^[3] and essentially belongs to the community. That's why I make a regular habit of telling you exactly how donated money is being spent.

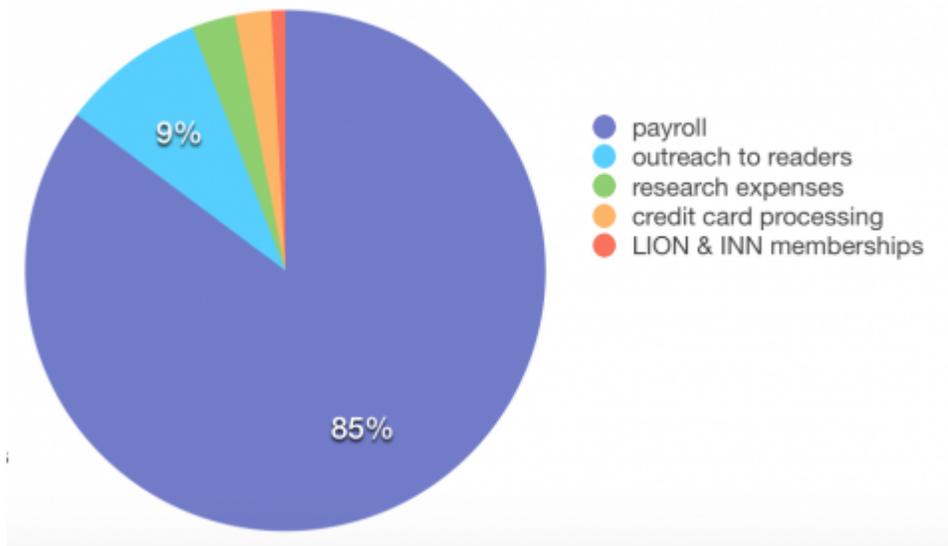
So how did we spend donated dollars in the first-half of 2019, and what did we produce?

First, here's a look at our expenses.

In the first-half of 2019, we spent \$49,720. As has been consistently true for the last several years, about 85% of dollars we paid out went to pay local people to provide news to the

community. From January through June, we spent \$41,714 on payroll and payroll taxes. In addition to that, we paid Layton & Richardson a total of \$375 to process our payroll and file our tax payments.

ELi Expenses First-Half 2019



Our next largest expense was for outreach to readers, taking up about 9% of our expenditures a \$4,388. This included primarily paying Facebook to allow us to reach readers. (Facebook makes it hard for us to reach readers ^[4] otherwise, and over half of our readers access us through Facebook, so we see this as a necessary expense.) We also paid MailChimp a fairly nominal amount for distribution of our two email newsletters ^[5] (\$20/month) and snail-mailed out material, including receipts, to donors.

The next largest expense, coming in at \$1,324, was for research related to our reporting. This amount includes fees paid under the Freedom of Information Act to the City of East Lansing to access public documents, fees paid to get copies of court documents, fees to SurveyMonkey for surveying readers, and a subscription to the Lansing State Journal so our core editing staff can access LSJ reporting. Like ELi, City Pulse and other outfits provide news for free.

ELi Expenses First-Half 2019

CATEGORY	EXPENSE
payroll	41,714
outreach to readers	4,388
research expenses	1,324
credit card processing	1,103
LION & INN memberships	426
office supplies	391
accountants	375

When supporters donate via check, that's cost-free to ELi. When they donate using credit cards via PayPal, GiveGab, or Patreon, we pay processing fees. We spent \$1,103 on credit card processing fees in the first-half of 2019. (We're now shutting down our Patreon donation system because it is by far the most expensive and their accounting methods also cause us headaches.) If you want to see your donation options, just click here ^[6].

We belong to two national professional organizations: the Institute for Nonprofit News ^[7] (INN) and LION (Local Independent Online News) Publishers ^[8]. In 2019, we have paid \$276 for INN membership and \$150 for LION membership. Both groups provide us peer support, access to valuable resources, and advocacy.

INN also makes it possible for us to participate in NewsMatch ^[9], which in March brought us \$30,000 ^[10] from national foundations including the Miami Foundation, Knight Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation. These were matching funds for money we raised from readers in November and December 2018. (You can see the slides for the invited presentation on NewsMatch that I gave in Houston at INN Days by clicking here ^[11].)

The \$391 for "office supplies" included stationery, envelopes, and photocopying.

What did we produce for that \$50,000?

From January 1 through June 30, 2019, ELi produced 295 original reports for our readers. If you're doing the math, that is a mere \$169 per article, including every little bit of overhead.

We covered City Council ^[12], East Lansing Public Schools ^[13], major development projects ^[14], local arts ^[15] events including festivals, the opening ^[16] and closing ^[17] and moving ^[18] of local businesses ^[19], the new income tax ^[20], parks and recreational opportunities ^[21], and the lives of interesting people ^[22] around town. We brought you portraits, features, environmental news, and investigative reports.



Above, clockwise from left: downtown business owners Hunter Seyfarth and Ken Campbell [19]; whistleblower Troy Williams [23]; Income Tax Administrator DeMar Boyd [24]; business owner and ELi reporter Jessy Gregg [16]; groundbreaking for the new Pinecrest Elementary School. [25]

We stayed on stories like the City Attorney's contract [26], marijuana politics [27], the eBay land sale [28] of a million-dollar public property, and the firing of a whistleblower [23]. And we answered your questions. [29]

In the first-half of 2019, ELi published the work of 31 local reporters, including Kepler Domurat-Sousa, Alice Dreger (me), Casandra Eriksen, Paige Filice, Andrew Graham, Jessy Gregg, Cody Harrell, Alex Hosey, James Hosey, Ann Kammerer, Annette Kopachik, Noa Kuszai, Mara Logan, Amalia Medina, Mark Meyer, Brad Minor, Ann Nichols, Chris Root, Kata Rothorn, Maysa Sitar, Somer Sodeman, Victoria Solomon, Aron Sousa, Sarah Spohn, Dan Totzkay, Jonathan Townley, Katie Van Dorn, Christopher Wardell, Karessa Wheeler, Nick Wright, and Daniel Zarka.

In addition, Val Thonger and Ken Sperber edited our calendar, providing information on hundreds of events, from City and ELPS meetings to concerts to fundraisers. Behind the scenes, Ann Nichols and Mark Meyer took on major editing work with me, and Lisa Lees and Morgan Lees managed our technology, including primarily our website. Jim Pivarnik, Raymond Holt, and Andrew Graham have been providing terrific photography to us.

Jodi Spicer worked for us as an all-around office manager, producing our weekly newsletter, handling donor records and relations, producing promotional materials, arranging meetings of our Community Advisory Board, and so much more. Jodi has been a lifesaver [30] to me and the organization, keeping our system tidy, thinking in innovative ways about my work running ELi, and frequently reminding me to breathe in the beauty of what this team does.

How does ELi do such great work on so little money?

A number of us at ELi (including me) work voluntarily for ELi, which keeps expenses low. We see this as public service work and our personal situations allow us to donate labor. Others are underpaid. The fact that our reporters are embedded also reduces how much work many of them need to do to stay informed and to bring accurate, timely information. That keeps costs low.



Photo by Jim Pivarnik.

Over the years, ELi's standards have risen. What we now bring you is consistently well-composed, well-researched, and often quite compelling. We work hard not to waste your money or your time. We see nonpartisan news provision as a core community service — like having a food bank, a homeless shelter, or a public library.

We appreciate that some of you give — with some of you giving a lot, to make sure those who can't give still can get local news for free. We encourage more of you to give today, so that we can stay strong in the second-half of 2019, particularly as we face needing to keep you informed about the new income tax and city finances, new elementary schools, new developments, and the November 5 City Council elections.

What's in the bank?

As I write, ELi has \$36,070 in the bank, and our expenses in the second-half of the year should look about the same — that is, it should cost about \$50,000 for the year's second-half, except for needing to spend about \$6,000 additional for our Summer Youth Journalism Program. (We still have a couple of spots open for that for local youth aged 14-22; read more ^[31].)



Above: Noa Kuszai, Lucy Mumma, and Alex Hosey, graduates of ELI's 2018 Summer Youth Journalism Program.

We have a couple of major donors currently considering funding the summer program for us. We will also continue to bring in funds each month from committed monthly donors ? and if that?s you, thank you! Also: Crunchy's ^[32] has renewed its sponsorship of the production of our weekly email newsletter, and the Responsibility Hospitality Council ^[33] and the owners of Beggar's Banquet ^[34] and Harrison Roadhouse ^[35] have renewed their sponsorship of our Arts & Entertainment reporting.

But additional donations made now ^[6] will make it possible for me to stay focused on news production and not on fundraising.

That said, if you?d rather wait to donate until your donation is doubled, know that we expect to again be accepted to NewsMatch, which will start November 1 and run through December 31. Much as I?d like your money in the bank for ELi now, I also am looking forward to encouraging you to give during that period, when we can get the big national foundations to double your gift to make possible our work through 2020.

Thank you to everyone who makes this possible! East Lansing has something extraordinary ? a local news brigade, in which we bring our own people the news ^[36]. You make that possible. And we are very grateful for your participation and support.

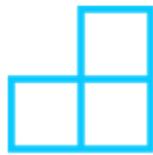
Please note we'll be on break for a few days, back on Tuesday, July 9. Happy Independence Day from your local independent news provider!

Related Categories:

Your ELi ^[37]

Community ^[38]

ELi is a member of INN and LION Publishers



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- [22] <https://eastlansinginfo.org/content/long-time-activist-and-community-icon-reflects-yesterday-today-and-tomorrow>
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- [32] <https://crunchyseastlansing.com/>
- [33] <https://www.olin.msu.edu/rhc/>
- [34] <https://beggarsbanquet.com/>
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