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# THE MEDIA BUSINESS; A Newspaper Battle Looms in San Diego Suburbs

By DEAN NELSON

What appears at first glance to be just another suburban newspaper merger could pose a considerable threat to this city's dominant paper, The San Diego Union-Tribune, by escalating a battle for readers and advertisers in the fastest-growing area of San Diego County.

The Tribune Company of Chicago said recently that it planned to sell its remaining newspaper holdings in Southern California to South Coast Newspapers Inc., a unit of Howard Publications, a privately held company based in Oceanside, Calif., that owns 18 newspapers in 12 states.

The largest paper to be sold is The Times Advocate, a 109-year-old daily in Escondido with a circulation of about 40,000. Escondido, with a population of 117,000, is in northern San Diego County, which has about 700,000 people and is growing at an annual rate of nearly 10 percent.

The paper's chief rival for readers in that part of San Diego County is another South Coast daily, the 113-year-old North County Blade-Citizen, which has a circulation of about 52,000. The Blade-Citizen is published in Oceanside, which is about 12 miles from Escondido and has a population of 145,000.

With South Coast poised to own the two main local papers in northern San Diego County, there is discussion that the company will merge them into one large newspaper.

And that could spell trouble for The Union-Tribune, which publishes four zoned editions in the north-county area with a combined circulation of about 102,000. That represents nearly one-third of The Union-Tribune's daily circulation of 372,000. San Diego County has a total population of more than 2.5 million.

"North San Diego County has been our best growth area for the last four to five years," said Mike Proebstle, circulation director at The Union-Tribune, which is owned by Copley Newspapers. "We're looking forward to the fight."

Last week, the Justice Department's antitrust division approved the terms of the Tribune sale, which were not disclosed. The deal is expected to be completed within days.

South Coast officials say it is premature to assume there will be one large paper emerging from the purchase.

"The Times Advocate will be its own paper unless we change both papers," said Tom Missett, the publisher of The Blade-Citizen. "We don't have a long-term master plan. No decision will be made until after we've been in there a while."

But Dick High, president of South Coast, said: "The trends are that you don't want to stand still in this business. You want to build something. We are going to build something that will best serve the readers of this area."

Thomas Nolan, a former editor of The Times Advocate who currently directs The Union-Tribune's coverage in northern San Diego County, was more succinct: "South Coast didn't buy The Times Advocate in order to keep two papers operating. It will be much more competitive with The Union-Tribune."

As its name suggests, The Union-Tribune is itself a result of a merger -- before they were combined in 1992, The Union was published in the morning and The Tribune was published in the afternoon.

Readers in Escondido, many of whom are middle class, say they are not as concerned about the prospect of more competition as they are about losing a valuable voice in their community.

"The Times Advocate is an excellent example of what a hometown community paper is supposed to be," said Carla DeDominicis, a former Escondido City Council member. "I enjoy reading about my neighbors and people I know."

Jack Raymond, an Escondido businessman, said he was mostly concerned that coverage of his city would be dominated by that of the larger Oceanside.

"The images of the two cities are so different," he said. "We're like a small, Midwestern community and Oceanside is more liberal and informal -- it's a coastal city." Oceanside is also home to Camp Pendleton, a Marine Corps base.

Even Mr. Nolan of The Union-Tribune said he was concerned about the possible loss of his former paper. "As a resident of Escondido I am a little fearful about an owner and publisher being from outside of the home town," he said.

Mr. High of South Coast declined to comment on the future of the 272 employees at The Times Advocate and the 250 at The Blade-Citizen.

Bob Carr, a spokesman for Tribune, said the company decided to sell The Times Advocate, along with The Enterprise, a weekly in nearby Fallbrook, and The Californian, a daily in Temecula, because they no longer fit in with the company's strategy of focusing on television properties in Southern California.

"Once we bought KTLA," Mr. Carr said, referring to the television station in Los Angeles, "we had to sell The L.A. Daily News because of antitrust laws. Then we sold our paper in Palo Alto, and pretty soon The Times Advocate was all we had out there. We have been talking to South Coast for more than a year."

Tribune still owns The Chicago Tribune, The Orlando Sentinel and The Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel in Florida and The Newport News Daily Press in Virginia, along with six radio stations and eight television stations, including the superstation WGN.

Terry Rodgers, who was a reporter at The Blade-Citizen before going to The Union-Tribune, said the added competition would improve The Union-Tribune's coverage of the area. "Competition improves quality," he said. "And who ultimately wins? The readers of north San Diego County."