

American Public Works Association
Exceptional Performance Award—Chapter Journalism

2021 Nomination Submission



**RAISE ^{OUR} GRADE,
MINNESOTA**

A SHARED COMMITMENT TO IMPROVE OUR INFRASTRUCTURE

<https://www.raiseourgrademn.org/>

Nominated by:
Minnesota Chapter of the
American Public Works Association



Chapter Strategic Planning at Work

Be the voice... If not us, who?

In late 2017, during the 2018-2020 strategic planning sessions, the APWA-MN Chapter identified **Voice of Public Works** as a strategic priority with the stated goal to *Be the Voice of Public Works to Government Leaders and Media*.

As discussions started within the chapter about how to achieve the desired outcomes specific to this priority, the chapter identified a few key challenges. The chapter has historically struggled with the inherent hurdles that public works professionals face—personal discomfort with legislative advocacy in addition to operating as a nonpartisan professional in the fundamentally political environment of state and local government. Given these obstacles, we solicited the help of [Scott Barsuhn](#), a local communication specialist and corporate “story teller” to help shape the chapter’s vision.

As the conversations among chapter leadership, [MN2050 Committee](#) members and our consultant Scott Barsuhn were happening, the group learned that the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Minnesota Section was going to be releasing the first ever *Report Card for Minnesota’s Infrastructure* in the fall of 2018. Quickly, synergy took over and with Barsuhn’s leadership the birth of the [Raise Our Grade, MN](#) idea was upon us. *Raise Our Grade, MN* would become a public awareness campaign stressing the importance of infrastructure investment in Minnesota and inviting Minnesotans to help raise the state's middling ASCE grade.



APWA-MN Strategic Plan

VISION: Advancing quality of life for all Minnesotans

MISSION: Support those who design, operate, improve and maintain public works and infrastructure through advocacy, education and member engagement.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

- Value of Public Works**
 - PW Exhibit at the Science Museum
 - STEM / Student outreach
 - Promote careers in public works
 - Asset management curriculum
- Voice of Public Works**
 - Raise Our Grade [raiseourgrademn.org](#)
 - GAC - Government Affairs Committee
- Membership/ Education**
 - National PWX/Snow conference hosting
 - Conferences/PDHs
 - Networking opportunities
 - Educational offerings

★ Key initiative for 2019/2020



A public awareness campaign stressing the importance of infrastructure investment in Minnesota.

A Website for the People

Making it easy to connect to elected officials

**RAISE ^{OUR} GRADE,
MINNESOTA**



BARSUHN

After many meetings determining how best to successfully achieve our strategic planning goal with the [Raise our Grade, MN](#) initiative, the [APWA-MN Chapter](#) officially utilized the expertise of [BARSUHN](#) to help with the overall branding, messaging, and eventual development of the new website. BARSUHN facilitated multiple stakeholder meetings to collect a holistic understanding of the desired outcome and provided an outsider's fresh eye to the public works story. Barsuhn was instrumental in developing the connection between what we wanted to do, what the right message was and how we could easily connect constituents to their elected officials.

PARTNERS

American Council of
Engineering Companies of
Minnesota (ACECMN)

Central States Water
Environment Association

City Engineers Association of
Minnesota (CEAM)

Metropolitan Airports
Commission (MAC)

Minnesota Asphalt Pavement
Association (MAPA)

Minnesota Chapter – APWA

Minnesota Council of Airports

Minnesota County Engineers
Association (MCEA)

Minnesota Department of
Transportation (Mn/DOT)

Minnesota Government
Engineering Council (MGEC)

Minnesota Ports Association

Minnesota Rural Water
Association (MRWA)

Minnesota Section – ASCE

Minnesota Section - AWWA

Minnesota Society of
Professional Engineers

Minnesota Transportation
Alliance

North-Central Section Institute
of Transportation Engineers

**RAISE ^{OUR} GRADE, A SHARED COMMITMENT TO IMPROVE OUR INFRASTRUCTURE
MINNESOTA www.raiseourgrademn.org**

As the campaign was moving from idea to action, the group prioritized an easy to use website that could connect MN constituents to their state and federal elected officials by simply entering their zip code on the main website page. We knew clarity and ease of use must take top priority with the final web design for it to be an effective tool to achieve our goals.

The idea was not only to inform the public about the state of Minnesota's infrastructure, but to give them the resources to understand how aging infrastructure impacts them on a personal level. We needed to make them aware how aging and failing infrastructure threatens their quality of life and the essential services they rely on and expect. If we were successful in communicating this, we could all but ensure they would take the time to click through the website and contact their state and federal elected officials with the message that *infrastructure investment must be top priority*.

In early 2018, the *Raise our Grade, MN* proposal along with other details related to the website were presented to the 17 MN2050 partners at a committee meeting where they were asked to commit to the success of the campaign using their organizational resources. As the excitement in the room was evident, the APWA-MN Chapter committed to delivering the *Raise our Grade, MN* website with the goal of lining up its debut with the release of the 2018 ASCE MN Infrastructure Report Card in fall 2018.

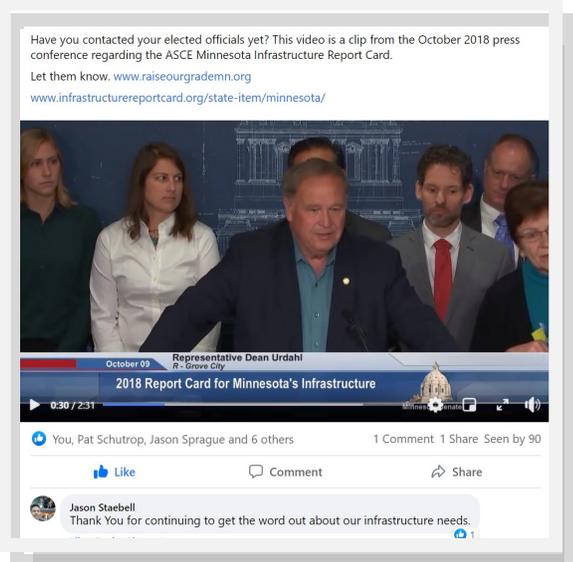
The Challenge in Front of Us

Elected officials react to the ASCE Report Card



In October 2018, ASCE released the [2018 Report Card for Minnesota's Infrastructure](#). At the legislative press conference formally announcing the release of the report card and the state's poor overall grade (C), industry professionals and legislators gathered to take questions from reporters. The legislators present maintained their personal support for infrastructure and an understanding that keeping infrastructure in good repair was extremely important. What we didn't expect was how they closed the press conference, dismissing the report card and any urgency of reacting to it. As elected leaders sometimes do, they went on to place the burden on ASCE and APWA-MN to raise the issue up politically to the point that the general public was talking to their legislators about the importance of

infrastructure. Their comments were disheartening—good thing we were ready to put the *Raise Our Grade, MN* campaign into action! Time to get to work!



"I hear actually, not a lot... you know they'll talk about other things. They're, frankly, more into what's happening nationally and such."
 - Representative Dean Urdahl, R Grove City

*I would agree. I'm not hearing it much in the campaign this year. Infrastructure has not risen to the top... **Your job, I suppose, is to tell this story** [Minnesota's C-grade from ASCE] in a way that raises it in people's minds."*
 - Representative Alice Hausman, DFL St. Paul

*"I would concur, **the temperature is not super high on this subject**, but hopefully this is the start of the conversation.... To be quite honest with you **silence is a form of communication with legislators...** if you're not engaging them on a subject, you're telling them everything is hunky dory and just fine. So, I'm hoping this is a referendum and the referendum is 'We need to be sure that we're providing the ability for people to live good lives throughout the entire state and not trade off against each other.'"*
 - Senator Scott Dibble, DFL Minneapolis



How it Works

What's in it for me you ask?

RAISE OUR GRADE, MINNESOTA

RAISE OUR GRADE, MINNESOTA

Welcome to Congressional District 5!



RAISE OUR GRADE!

Populous and diverse, our district balances the elements of urban life with tree-lined streets and city lakes. We have skyways and bike trails. Skyscrapers and suburbs. For every sport enthusiast, there's a team in close proximity. For every arts fan, there's a famous museum or two, a theater or two, or a music venue a short drive away.

Each of our cities has its own unique character, whether Minneapolis, Brooklyn Center, Robbinsdale, Golden Valley, Fridley, or St. Louis Park—and the strength of our infrastructure is integral to our quality of life. It's also an equity issue. High quality systems mean everyone is served equally and can access safe roads, structurally sound bridges, and clean water.

Investment in our infrastructure will bring jobs and greater safety to our communities. Our legislators need to hear from us. Click the Raise Our Grade button and let them know you support investment in our infrastructure.

Our district's urgent needs

Infrastructure projects will address critical problems, prepare structures for current and future capacity, and maintain, expand, and improve essential systems. Much-needed funding will cover design/engineering, materials, and construction.

[Check out a list of projects that require funding in our district.](#)

A Short Story of Infrastructure: A City For The Future

Before World War II, you'd have seen grazing cows—not houses—on this land 8 miles south of Minneapolis. But as military personnel returned from the war, farm fields rapidly became modest single family homes and lawns. Streets were graded. Eventually, septic tanks were replaced with water mains and sewer pipes. Storage systems for clean, safe drinking water were developed.

Like other suburban neighborhoods of the time, Richfield grew explosively. In 1950, fewer than 3800 people lived in Richfield, by 1954, almost 31,800 people did. When the nation's first indoor mall, Southdale, was built in an adjoining suburb in 1956, Richfield's reputation as an ideal place to raise a family was well established.



Infrastructure Aging Out

The people and businesses of Richfield have always depended on clean drinking water, wastewater treatment, and a high quality stormwater system for pollution and flooding control. But it's been 70 years since those water mains and pipes were installed under Richfield streets. The original clay pipes are growing thin and brittle with age. Some are breaking.

In addition, the population has grown. As people and businesses move to the area, usage of the city's pipes and lift stations increases dramatically.

Climate change brings rain events that put a strain on existing systems. Old stormwater pipes with 60" diameter are inadequate. Some of today's pipes should measure 90" in diameter to manage the flow of water.



As Minneapolis' oldest suburb, Richfield uniquely symbolizes the coming need for infrastructure investment. Improvements and proactive repair have been delayed for decades due to inadequate funding. That gap is creating a growing concern about how much longer older systems will last.

Following the release of the ASCE Minnesota Section Infrastructure Report Card, the *Raise Our Grade, MN* website went live. The website is specifically designed to be mobile friendly and directs you to enter your zip code. Visitors are then directed to their Congressional District homepage where they are welcomed with a description of *the unique qualities of their area of the state*. The story then leads them to the importance of infrastructure and the urgent infrastructure needs that must be addressed to maintain the quality of life they know and rely on.

For each Congressional District, the website has uniquely curated examples of infrastructure shortcomings that are designed to personalize the issues and motivate the user to take action—after all, it's simply human nature to care more about what is in your own backyard when compared to some far off place you've never been able to visit.

RAISE OUR GRADE, MINNESOTA		
DISTRICT 5 URGENT NEEDS		
HIGHWAY	PROJECT/DESCRIPTION	COST
62	I-35W to TH 77: construct EB auxiliary lane	\$22,560,000
62	TH 77 to Portland Ave: construct auxiliary lanes	\$15,230,000
55	TH 52: construct NB TH 77 to WB TH 62/glover ramp	\$19,650,000
62	Lake Street: reconstruct interchange	\$36,550,000
	TH 77: construct ramps	\$1,960,000
		\$3,850,000
ROADS		
CITY/COUNTY	BRIDGE NO.	COST
Golden Valley	93508	\$2,200,000
Hennepin	18901	\$3,320,000
Hennepin	27592	\$2,750,000
Hennepin	90494	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	90437	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	27006	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	27007-27008	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	27516	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	4610	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	7258	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	91333	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	15	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	27502	\$2,500,000
Hennepin	194	\$15,500,000
Hennepin	462	\$2,500,000
Minneapolis	16	\$2,500,000
Minneapolis	72	\$2,500,000
Minneapolis	9147	\$1,500,000
Minneapolis	19549	\$1,300,000
Minneapolis	90591	\$1,800,000
St. Louis Park	27067	\$2,000,000
St. Louis Park	27564	\$2,000,000
AVIATION		
City	Project	Cost
Crystal	Crystal Airport	\$25,770,000
Robbinsdale	Runway 14/32 Modifications	\$1,500,000
DRINKING WATER AND WASTEWATER		
SYSTEM NAME	PROJECT DESCRIPTION	COST
Robbinsdale	Source - Well Repl. Rehab & Seal	\$3,800,000
McKinley	Rehab collection	\$1,745,487
Minnehaha Creek WD	Blake Rd Stormwater Treatment	\$342,347
		\$2,734,350

THE LIST

How it Works

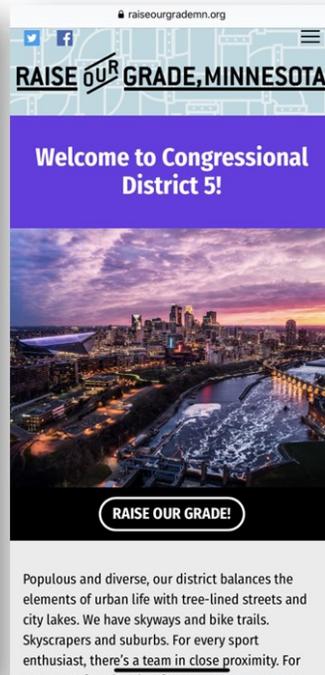
Making it easy to connect to elected officials



On the homepage you are introduced to the campaign, learn how infrastructure is connected to everyone, and see that investment needs are growing.



You are able to explore what the grades mean and then are invited to visit your district's specific needs by entering your zip code.



On your district's page you are welcomed with a specific message designed to connect you to the unique attributes and urgent infrastructure needs of your district.



At the bottom of the district page you are invited to customize the message and tell your legislators it's time to invest in this critical infrastructure.

Infrastructure funding is a nonpartisan issue. As a constituent, I'm concerned about seriously overdue infrastructure investment in Minnesota. Please make it a priority—for our safety, our businesses, and our economy.



Taking it to the streets (and social media)

Elected officials need to hear you care

Following the formal launch of the *Raise our Grade, MN* initiative, APWA-MN chapter members got to work taking the infrastructure story directly to the people. We knew we could easily connect with thousands of Minnesotans and professionals at various events throughout the year. We were even successful in sharing a booth with APWA-MN Chapter's STEM Day at the Minnesota State Fair, aka the "Great Minnesota Get-Together"!

What we found was an enthusiastic willingness to talk about everyday infrastructure and disbelief that elected leaders *actually needed* to hear from voters to prioritize needed investments that impact their quality of life!

We called on our membership and chapter leaders to identify any and every opportunity to get in front of people to raise awareness and become advocates for Minnesota's infrastructure, and they responded.

RAISE OUR GRADE, MINNESOTA

Our first outreach event @MSF was great! Lots of support for our infrastructure! Thanks to all the volunteers that showed up to spread the word! #raiseourgrademn



Key events attended in 2019 include:

- Minnesota State Fair
- League of MN Cities Adjusters Conference
- MN LTAP Fall Maintenance Expo
- Civil Engineering Day—Science Museum of MN
- Women in Science and Engineering—Science Museum of MN
- Science Rocks!—St. Cloud State/St. Johns Universities
- STEMLink—Dunwoody Institute, Normandale College, Century College
- Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan ISD 196 STEM Career Fair
- Robbinsdale Parents & Students University

Reaching out to 1700 public works peeps at the Fall Maintenance Expo in St. Cloud today! Looking good!!

Mark Ray (Crystal Director of Public Works) represented APWA and talked about careers in public works at Robbinsdale School District's Parent and Student University! He did double duty and took the opportunity to share the Raise Our Grade, MN message with attendees. Thanks, Mark!!

Day 2 of the Fall Maintenance Expo! Another 1400 public works pros coming through! #raiseourgrademn

1 Comment 1 Share Seen by 106

3 Shares Seen by 97

21

Getting the message out!

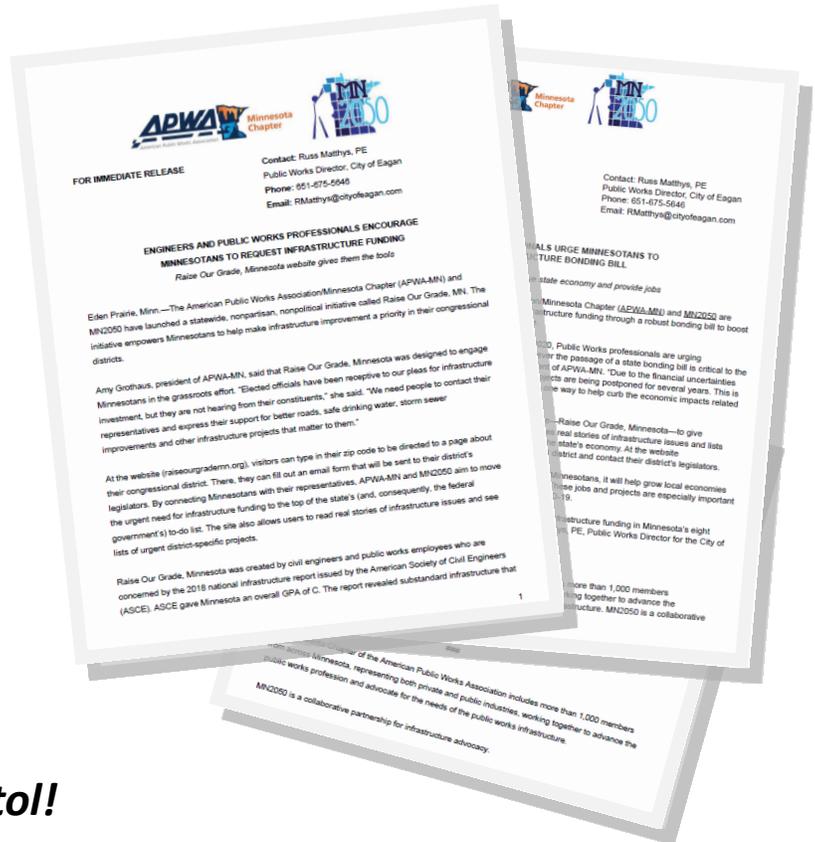
Casting our net far and wide



In the spirit of promoting our newly minted *Raise our Grade, MN* campaign, and to support infrastructure legislation, we've distributed news releases to all major news outlets around Minnesota to keep the pressure on legislators and the campaign relevant.

Press Release Distribution:

- WCCO
- KSTP
- FOX-9
- KARE-11
- Minnesota Public Radio
- Star Tribune
- Pioneer Press
- St. Cloud Times
- Rochester Post Bulletin
- U of MN Minnesota Daily



A Champion at the State Capitol!

The release of *ASCE's 2018 Report Card for Minnesota's Infrastructure* and the *Raise Our Grade, MN* campaign were all the inspiration Ann Johnson Stewart needed to find a civil engineer to run for state office. Initially she was trying to identify someone, little did she know she had inspired herself. At the closing of her successful election campaign Minnesota infrastructure has a fun-loving, energetic, and personable champion at the capitol!



Civil Engineer Ann Johnson Stewart Announces run for MN Senate District 44 seat in 2020.

"By trade, I'm a civil engineer. I understand the importance of government-supported infrastructure funding, and my company has worked successfully with townships, cities, counties, and the state to build publicly-funded roads, bridges, and buildings. We need an engineer like me at the Capitol who can educate fellow legislators about infrastructure issues."

Infrastructure Talks

Connecting with Legislators in a Pandemic



In Fall 2020, the Raise our Grade subcommittee of the APWA-MN Chapter began brainstorming ways to connect the Raise our Grade effort with our elected officials in the Minnesota Legislature. We knew at the outset that traditional in-person lobbying was going to be all but impossible in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The subcommittee knew that virtual events might find a more receptive audience in 2021 than they would've historically and we wanted to use that to our advantage! Various ideas were floated but it wasn't until an informal meet and greet with a newly elected State Senator that we began to find our groove. A Civil Engineer by trade and engineering firm founder/owner herself, Senator Ann Johnson-Stewart (DFL #44) was quick to lend her support and enthusiasm to the subcommittee's efforts.

February is Infrastructure Month!

Please join us for

Thursday Morning Infrastructure Talks

Bring your coffee and pull up a chair.

@7:45A

- February 4 ♦ Infrastructure—Dig Deeper
- February 11 ♦ Water—From Tap to Toilet
- February 18 ♦ Emerging Trends
- February 25 ♦ Benefits of Bonding

Hosted by

American Public Works Association—MN Chapter

Raise Our Grade, MN

MN2050

Senator Ann Johnson-Stewart

At this time, our initial idea of hosting a single virtual "Infrastructure 101" with rookie legislators on relevant committees (capital investment and transportation) was starting to take shape. Senator Johnson-Stewart wondered aloud why we would stop at one session, and why we would only invite those first term elected officials? Shortly thereafter, the subcommittee unilaterally declared February 2021 "Infrastructure Month" at the Minnesota Capitol and began organizing four unique panels to discuss the myriad infrastructure needs and concerns at the local, county and state levels in Minnesota. It was made clear to all participants that these talks were to be nonpartisan by nature and that the intent was not to gain support for a particular legislative "ask" but to raise awareness of the real needs facing the State's critical quality of life

infrastructure. In an effort to cast a wide net, the chapter invited *all* 201 Senators and Representatives, in addition to their direct political staff. Organizers, panelists and APWA-MN members tapped into personal and professional networks to ensure a robust turn out at each event.



Session 1: Dig Deeper

Our first Infrastructure Talk served as a macro-level look at Minnesota's infrastructure and primed participants for the forthcoming sessions.



Session 2: Water—From Tap to Toilet

The second iteration of the Infrastructure Talks focused on drinking water, stormwater and waste water. Water industry trends and drivers were discussed in the context of our water utility infrastructure.



Session 3: Emerging Trends

The third session centered on emerging trends in the public infrastructure realm related to technology and climate, and the implications for local agencies as they find themselves in reactive situations as climate assumptions from the past are proven wrong again and again.



Session 4: Benefits of Bonding

Our final session focused on the importance of robust capital investment legislation to Minnesota's economy and our shared infrastructure. Speakers shared examples of specific projects that both received and did not receive funding and what it meant for those communities.



Where do we go from here?

We're just beginning!

Our goal with the Raise our Grade initiatives has been to sow the seeds of curiosity and build a base of support amongst legislators, the public and industry professionals so they have the tools they need to individually and collectively help Minnesota confront the 21st century challenges that our built environment faces. Our hope is that the content we've curated and ideas we've fostered will take root in individuals throughout the professional and political realm and will lead to a grassroots voice that can begin to grow larger and more powerful in support of public works, and ultimately infrastructure investment.



Fundamentally, we believe that the achievements of *Raise Our Grade, MN* have laid a foundation for future work. In closing the “First Act” of this effort, founding members of the subcommittee are more enthusiastic than ever that we can keep the momentum rolling in a way that benefits all of public works—from the unaware consumer of infrastructure to the hardened industry veteran. Our immediate plans include but are not limited to:

Capitol Connection: Continue to develop the chapter’s experience in the legislative arena and work more closely with organizations that have been active in the legislative process to solidify the collaboration of our partners and to become a nonpartisan political force for infrastructure investment.

Local Chambers of Commerce: Develop a relationship with the State Chamber of Commerce in order to reach the Chambers across the state and raise awareness of the infrastructure needs, become a resource for them as well as gain their support for infrastructure investment across the state. By helping them understand that job- and industry-supporting investments in our human-made world feed the local economy and can put Minnesota ahead of the pack when compared to national and international competitors.

K-12 Curriculum: Collaborate with educational institutions and our MN2050 partners to promote the public works profession as a viable career path for all walks of life. Whether an individual wants to design a bridge or operate a bulldozer, we need to make young people aware that this industry provides a fulfilling and sustainable career path. Without people able to design and build the assets, investment can only do so much!

Infrastructure Walks: Now that we’ve given legislators a peak into the public works world via the *Infrastructure Talks* it’s time to take them out into the field to check out the state’s growing needs with *Infrastructure Walks*. With the help of Senator Johnson Stewart, and leaning on the expertise of our chapter members, we intend to organize up close and personal tours of areas of need such as wastewater treatment plants, locks and dams, bridges, airports, lift stations, and water treatment plants so they can see the needs firsthand.

***Thank you!** On behalf of everyone involved in the Raise our Grade, MN effort and the entire APWA-MN Chapter, thank you for the opportunity to share this story and submit it for the Exceptional Performance Award for Chapter Journalism!*