

Joint Finance Hearing on Public Broadcasting

Comments

Good Morning. My name is Gloria Jones-Bey. I am a member of the Board of Friends of WHA TV and a long time supporter of public broadcasting, and I appreciate the opportunity to give my input into the discussion about the future of public television in Wisconsin.

There are many issues to be resolved in this discussion, but there are some key issues that lie at the heart of the discussion and must be resolved before any final solution is reached.

First, the issue of conversion to digital TV. By mandate of the FCC Wisconsin Public Television must begin broadcasting digital television signals by May of 2003, or we will lose our broadcasting license. No one wants this to occur, and so timely resolution is essential if the results are to be achieved before the deadline.

This conversion will require substantial capital expenditures and result in increased annual operating costs. While WHA-TV has been very successful in obtaining public support for programming and operations, the need for state support for the development of the infrastructure necessary to move to digital is essential. State funding in the next biennium or a commitment from the state is key to our being able to develop a DTV capital campaign. Without a state commitment it is unlikely that we could mount a successful capital campaign, and this would create problems for a timely transition. A delay would also increase the cost of this conversion because as other stations convert and the demand for digital equipment rises, so too will the costs. We cannot look to a commercial in which programming is held hostage to sponsors or other agendas. Revenue generating ideas and initiatives should remain within the context of a not-for-profit, public service model.

Another key issue is governance of public television. A governance structure should result in increased efficiencies and cost savings from the current model. The Friends of WHA-TV is recommending a new 501 C(3) organization which would assume the licenses currently held by ECB. Broadcast licenses held by the University of Wisconsin would remain with the University. The new organization would have a governing Board with a majority of its members drawn from public broadcasting supporters around the state, representation from the UW and some mechanism to ensure oversight of state funds. The organization would have access to state bonding for upgrading and replacement or equipment. In addition to determining policy and strategic direction, a major effort of this board will be fundraising. The business expertise of a community representatives will best provide this leadership and ensure a dynamic organization capable of negotiating our rapidly changing environment. This will be a continuation of the longstanding tradition of going to the public for financial support. In order to be successful in this effort, the public must view this organization as having editorial independence, integrity and sound management. Timely and beneficial resolution of the

governance issues are extremely important for future fundraising efforts for future capital campaigns or operational expenses.

The relationship with the University is extremely important. There are significant fundraising advantages brought by the UW. The current relationship of Friends of WHA-TV with the University is a model of a public/ private partnership which maximizes resources of the university, allowing substantial cost savings to WHA. The University provides substantial in-kind administrative support, including studio space, access to University production equipment, payroll services, purchasing, legal services and telecommunications. If these resources had to be developed from scratch or duplicated, the savings from the reorganization would essentially vanish as new support systems and infrastructures would be required. Additionally, the University is both a resource and a market for Public Television, and therefore close ties are important to both organizations. WHA-TV, the University's station is recognized as one of the top public television program providers in the country. This is something in which we can take pride and which we do not want to change.

There must be a transition team including representatives from Friends of WHA-TV and WPRA who should make up the majority of the team. It is hoped that the transition would occur in a timely manner in order to maintain public confidence and allow a reorganization which would meet the necessary timetable.

The immediate concerns about digital television are related to the initial high costs of transition to this medium. However, digital television will be a boon to maximizing future strategies throughout the state, preserving and enhancing distance learning broadcast services for K-12, Technical College system colleges and University. This technology will allow Wisconsin Public Television to broadcast data to schools, home and the workplace. It would be able to complement the TEACH program by broadcasting directly to the schools, or continuous training for businesses by broadcasting directly to the workplace.

The Friends of WHA-TV and the Wisconsin Public Radio Association have worked together to develop a recommendation on the issue of governance. That position will be made public over the next couple of days.

Thank you



**THE LEAGUE
OF WOMEN VOTERS OF WISCONSIN, INC.**

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**Statement to the Joint Finance Committee Regarding
Wisconsin Public Broadcasting Policy Proposals in SB45/AB133**

April 1999

In March of 1995 the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin stated its opposition to including several specific policy proposals in the Budget, among them one regarding Wisconsin Public Broadcasting. At that time the proposal involved transferring the functions of the Educational Communications Board to the Department of Administration. We said:

... the League wishes to raise a note of caution in regard to the proposal to transfer the Educational Communications Board's broadcasting capabilities to the Department of Administration. The focus of Wisconsin's public broadcasting has been and continues to be educational and informational. Its partnership with our education institutions has resulted in a valuable service being available to all areas of our state.

Will transfer of broadcasting responsibilities to a government administrative agency lessen the emphasis on the educational elements? Will budgetary tensions arise when program needs require expenditures for equipment expansion? Will this type of transfer be beneficial or detrimental to our citizens' right to know?

The proposed transfer did not take place. However, as in 1995, the present proposal would place Public Broadcasting in the Department of Administration and would go even further, eliminating ECB's responsibilities and giving the governor the power to appoint 7 of 9 members of an operating Board. The proposal elicits the same questions asked in 1995, and the likely answers require us to oppose this new proposal.

A private, non-profit board, raising funds to pay for the digital installation might well expect to exercise programming authority. Furthermore, gubernatorial appointments could bring partisan politics into the programming.

The past success of public broadcasting in Wisconsin leads us to want extensive consideration of any changes, the kind of consideration that cannot be given in the course of Budget decisions. We urge the Legislature to remove from the Budget those items that pertain to public broadcasting. The matter can be taken up after completion of the Budget.

LWWWI Legislative Committee Contact: Connie Threinen

CURRENT VICE-PRESIDENT OF FRIENDS OF
WHA-TV

Thank you for allowing us...roughly 26,000 members and 600,000 viewers...a voice today. My name is Greg Bass. I am here today as a representative and member of the Friends of WHA-TV, which also works on behalf of another 32,000 families around the state. I am here to help keep Public Television going in Wisconsin. I have a simple, yet very serious request...we need money. If WPT is to continue to exist, we will have to complete a conversion to a digital delivery by the Federally mandated date of May - 2003. Without this money for the transition to DTV, Public Television in Wisconsin will cease to exist after that date. The timing for this funding is also important. It needs to be included in this budget...if it is delayed or eliminated from this budget cycle Public TV is as good as gone. I have heard that some think that the Federal Government will extend the deadline. I hope that you all decide not to take that gamble because I believe an extension are unlikely. The digital conversion of commercial stations has already started at great cost to those stations. These commercial stations will not want to see their counterparts allowed any grace period. They will put considerable pressure on the Federal Government to maintain that date.

Friends of WHA-TV's plan is to assist in the funding for the DTV conversion with a capital campaign. We would very much like to start with this effort soon. Without state funding and the resolution of the Governance issue a fund raising campaign will be impossible. In the next few days Friends of WHA-TV jointly with WPRA will offer a proposal in response to the Governor's request for recommendations of a new organizational structure. Potential donors need to know that Public TV will remain "public".

THANK YOU,

Greg Bass

TOTAL * 40-50 MIL NEEDED . NEXT 6 YEARS

UNIVERSITY
4.1 MIL FOR NEXT BIENNium
14 + mil ECB.
8 MIL. START-UP - BARE MINIMUM
FOR - TOWER WAUSAU
- OPERATION OF TELECOMMUNICATION CENTER