



Analysis: FCC to consider increasing the number of low-power FM radio stations

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STEVE INSKEEP, host: The Federal Communications Commission is promising to consider increasing the number of **low-power** FM radio stations. For three years now, the **FCC** has been considering ways to encourage more of these small community stations over the objections of traditional broadcasters, including the management of this network. Those broadcasters still say the small stations could cause interference, as NPR's Rick Karr reports.

RICK KARR reporting:

At a press conference last week, **FCC** Chairman Michael Powell said that in the run-up to the commission's June decision to ease restrictions on how much of the media a single company can own, thousands of Americans wrote or called to complain about the consolidation of the media industry.

Mr. MICHAEL POWELL (**FCC** Chairman): We learned about a deep-seated anxiety in the American public about a commitment to local values and local communities. And I think then it's incumbent on policy-makers to try to hear those concerns and create constructive responses, if any, to them.

KARR: Powell said the **FCC** will process a backlog of nearly 2,000 applications for **low-power** FM stations that were submitted three years ago. So far about 100 of the community stations have gone on the air. They're run by religious groups, schools, ethnic organizations and activists.

(Soundbite of radio program)

Unidentified Announcer: You're listening to Environmental Community Radio(ph) from the mid-Chesapeake Bay region. This is WRYR, LP, Sherwood, brought to you by South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development.

KARR: That's SACRED, for short. The Maryland group was founded in 1995 to fight suburban sprawl along the Chesapeake Bay. Until SACRED got its own radio station, group member Mike Shay says that the few stations that covered development disputes gave more air time to local government officials, SACRED's opponents. Shay remembers calling in to one such show to confront the county executive.

Mr. MIKE SHAY: And she became flustered. Instead of answering the question, she basically said, 'Why don't you get your own radio show?'

KARR: Instead, SACRED got its own station. No one knows exactly how many people hear WRYY. Shay says it can reach more than 10,000 potential listeners. The station is on the air 24/7, although only about 50 hours a week are live. The rest of the schedule is filled by a computer automatically playing music, station identification and prerecorded anti-sprawl announcements.

(Soundbite of announcement)

Unidentified Woman: Here's a message from your friends at South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development. This is an update about the Crandall Cove development in Franklin Manor.

KARR: The station cost less than \$20,000 to build and less than \$10,000 a year to operate, donated by local businesses and listeners. It's run entirely by volunteers. They set the antenna atop a flagpole at a marina on the opposite shore of the Chesapeake Bay. They built the computer system that sends the signal over the Internet from the studio to the transmitter and they produce the shows. Casual listeners are not likely to confuse WRYY with a professional station. If a truck drives by or a phone rings during a poetry reading, they're likely to hear it on the air.

(Soundbite of radio show with phone ringing)

Unidentified Man: 'There is this happy tone.' That was "August" by Mary Oliver.

KARR: Despite the rough edges, volunteers and listeners say that WRYY has become a focal point for the community. The live shows include one for Native Americans, others that feature blues and gospel music and several environmental talk shows. Every Thursday afternoon Annette Najjar hosts a children's program.

(Soundbite of radio program)

Ms. ANNETTE NAJJAR: Well, it was kind of another nasty day today, that kind of day we're stuck indoors for a while, just itching to make some trouble.

KARR: Najjar says she got involved at WRYY to provide an antidote to another kind of sprawl.

Ms. NAJJAR: The market for children's entertainment is dominated by the large media companies, Disney, Nickelodeon, to an extent even public television.

KARR: Najjar says she wants to bring listeners children's music from alternative sources. **Low-power** FM is only available in rural and undeveloped areas. It's because of restrictive licensing rules, according to a representative of advocacy group The Prometheus Radio Project who calls himself Pete tri Dish.

Mr. PETE TRI DISH (The Prometheus Radio Project): In the way that it's been implemented, there've been no **low-power** FMs in the top 50 urban markets in the United States. And so, in terms of what Chairman Powell was saying the other day, **low-power** FM as it stands now is no real remedy to the concentration of media ownership.

KARR: Tri Dish says the **FCC**'s original proposal would have brought dozens of stations to urban areas, but the National Association of Broadcasters and National Public Radio argued new stations would have interfered with existing stations. The two organizations convinced Congress to scale back the plan and order the **FCC** to commission an independent study of interference. That came out last month and Tri Dish says it confirms what advocates have been saying all along.

Mr. TRI DISH: These very small signals, these 100 watt signals, could not really substantially interfere with the signals of a 10,000 watt station or a 20,000 watt station or a 50,000 watt station.

KARR: NPR has asked the **FCC** for an extra three months to respond to the study. NPR President Kevin Klose says in general he feels the **FCC** has been hasty in allowing **low-power** FM stations on the air and has paid scant attention to potential interference to existing stations.

KEVIN KLOSE (NPR President): My belief is that the procedures that could have been followed here would have been to try out **low-power** FM in the real world first. It'd be like sort of designing a car and then sort of selling it to people without ever trying it on the test track or running it around the corner just to see how well it drives. That was never done in the **FCC's** rush to bring **low-power** FMs to the fore.

KARR: Advocates say NPR and the broadcasters association are dragging their feet. Klose says NPR does not oppose **low-power** FM.

(Soundbite of water)

KARR: On the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, Hamilton Chaney runs the Herrington Harbour North Marina, not far from WRYR's studios.

Mr. HAMILTON CHANEY (Herrington Harbour North Marina): My mother's family has been here for a couple hundred years. My father's family has been here for 300 years.

KARR: Chaney says until he was a teen-ager in the 1980s, the nearest radio station was in Washington, DC, some 50 miles away. Then the area got a new station in Annapolis, 20 miles away. Chaney says the fact that the western shore of the Chesapeake finally has its own radio station is a sign of progress.

Mr. CHANEY: You know, part of progress is being able to have a voice and say things and have people hear you.

KARR: FCC Chairman Michael Powell says the commission will weigh comments on **low-power** FM before making a recommendation to Congress. No new license applications are being accepted. Rick Karr, NPR News.

RENEE MONTAGNE (Host): This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Renee Montagne.

INSKEEP: And I'm Steve Inskeep.

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