

A Radio Station is Born with Test

Low-power buffs hope WRYR becomes south Arundel forum

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Hey kids, let's build a radio station.

With the can-do spirit of true believers, more than a hundred self-described media activists descended yesterday on a riverfront campground in Southern Anne Arundel County for a "radio barn raising" to help launch WRYR - 97.5 on the FM dial.

The participants are at the forefront of a movement to revive low-power community radio stations as a forum for civic groups, neighborhoods, churches, schools, and others whose voices are largely absent on large commercial stations. WRYR organizers say that the 100-watt station - with a projected broadcast range of 15 miles - will give expression to the diverse voices of Chesapeake Bay communities, from bluegrass musicians to watermen to bird-watchers.

The station is the brainchild of Michael Shay, a leader of the South Arundel Citizens for Responsible Development, or SACReD, which holds the Federal Communications Commission license for WRYR.

In the past five years, the environmental group has built a reputation for tenaciousness, with victories in two key land-use battles to stop development in South County. Station organizers say that WRYR- which will air test broadcasts until full programming starts April 1- will be the first station in Maryland to broadcast under revised federal rules that legalized low-power stations.

The weekend event - held by SACReD at the rustic West River United Methodist Camp - aims to get WRYR ready for the air and bring together low-power radio pioneers, license applicants and experts in radio technology.

"It's a great crossing of worlds and sharing of knowledge," said Jon Strange, a member of the Prometheus Radio Project, an organization that helps low-power stations get off the ground.

The conference ends at 1 p.m. tomorrow with WRYR's scheduled inaugural broadcast. The taped program includes a concert by the Good Deale Bluegrass Band and the annual meeting of the Talbot Preservation Alliance.

Yesterday, Shay said he had "goose bumps" as he stood in the camp's dining hall at lunch and looked out at the radio enthusiasts swapping stories from the low-power trenches. Some had traveled from California, Massachusetts and Alaska.

"Right now, so much of radio is held in corporate commercial hands or really large institutions," said a Prometheus founder, "Pete tri Dish," who used that pseudonym when he was on low-power radio. He sparked Shay's interest in starting a radio station when he gave a low-power workshop in Baltimore three years ago.

"SACReD is just a scrappy, scrappy little grassroots environmental organization, and who could be a better trustee of the public airwaves?" he said.

SACReD was among 3,000 applicants for low-power licenses that flooded FCC offices after the commission decided to make room on the radio dial for noncommercial stations under 100 watts.

Community radio was popular in the 1960s and 1970s before federal restrictions made such stations illegal. The low-power radio movement gained momentum during the past decade as pirate radio stations went on the air to protest the trend toward corporate media ownership.

When SACReD received its construction permit in April, Shay went to work, raising money for equipment and rounding up radio talent.

A local businessman donated studio space in his small office building in Churchton, and station volunteer Ken Lewis persuaded large area radio stations to donate old equipment.

WTOP, a Washington station, provided a critical component- a 25-year-old stereo console broadcast board.

"It only needed a hundred dollars' worth of parts and labor," said Lewis, who like many low-power advocates had a radio show in college.

"I believe the station is going to snowball," he said. "We need something that brings the community together."

Jeremy Lansman, a radio engineer who helped start some of the well-known community stations 30 years ago, traveled from Anchorage, Alaska, to help WRYR set up its transmitter. It's located in the bar at Loews Wharf Marina on Tilghman Island, and the temporary antenna is on the marina's roof.

Four members of Youth Voice Radio - a teen-age group that produces programs and has applied for a low-power license - traveled from Raleigh, N.C.

"It's a really inspiring atmosphere to be around all of these wonderful people," said Tim

Stallman, 17. "We just went back to our rooms last night full of ideas."

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