

The Secretary
House of Representatives Committee of Enquiry in Rural and Regional Radio
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

17.10.00

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

The Committee of Management of West Gippsland Community Radio Inc. wishes to draw the attention of the Committee to its firm belief that locally-focused radio services in rural areas are being provided most effectively by Community Radio stations.

Staffed by volunteers, and with an ethos of supporting local organizations, publicising local issues, covering local sport, playing music which is not heard on commercial stations, and allowing open access to the airwaves to groups and individuals, Community Radio stations fill the gap left by the networking of commercial radio.

Moreover, not only are these services provided free of charge to the community, each station is self-funding. It's a never-ending struggle to raise the funds needed to continue the service. Local councils are often helpful, local businesses provide sponsorship, membership subscriptions provide a small pool of money. Very few grants are available, but generally these are available only to stations on full licences. Generally, this is a service which is provided through the personal generosity and dedication of the volunteer presenters and management.

Radio is the constant companion. It can go everywhere with the audience, unlike TV and newspapers, which require a static position for effective interaction. For this reason, it is the ideal medium for people whose disabilities make reading or handling printed matter difficult or impossible.

Newspaper publication of community news is indirect and second hand, is bulky and fragile in storage. Radio gives members of the public the opportunity to speak directly on behalf of their organisations, and to keep a copy of the recording which can be replayed and archived. CD and minidisc recording provides a longer lasting record than paper.

Community radio enables ordinary people to participate with a minimum of training, and can offer tuition and experience in a wide range of media skills. There is no cult of the individual with community radio, and listeners can think of the presenters in a more friendly and accessible light.

With radio, entertainment and information can be combined.

Because community radio stations are not driven by a profit motive, they can be more flexible and interactive, and can provide an immediate response to need. Urgent notices can be put to air immediately, and in emergency situations can put their facilities at the disposal of the Emergency Services. Stories are told of people ringing in a lost dog notice, only to find themselves speaking to someone in Perth; or of being told that their notice would not go to air for at least three days, and then would get only one mention. The presenter at the local community radio station was, however, able to put the notice to air immediately, and have it repeated on a frequent basis until the dog was found. On a national or international scale, one lost dog is of absolutely no importance, but to a family, it is little short of tragic. The human scale is lost when radio stations are networked.

The wide range of music genres presented serves an educational function for young and old alike, and makes choice possible. Community radio is also in a position to be able to play requests at short notice.

Community radio stations are required by the ABA to provide music that is not being offered by the commercials serving the area. This means that niche groups such as the disabled, ethnic minorities, the elderly, and those who don't accept the kind of music thought by commercial programmers to be the kind wanted by those members of the community with money to spend.

A background in community radio is well regarded by selection committees for commercial broadcasting courses. Presenting is not the only skill which can be learned – administration, copy-writing, production and technical skills can also be gained through participation in community radio, and personal qualities of dependability and resourcefulness are developed.

Community Radio will remain locally owned. There is no risk of it becoming an attractive investment opportunity for international consortiums. Globalisation provides a greater threat to commercial networks than to local community stations.

The more remote a network becomes from its community, the more expensive and inappropriate is the advertising for local small businesses. Similarly, local businesses provide the financial backbone of community radio through their 'sponsorship', and large multi-branched firms are not interested in this outlet. So the connection between local businesses and the community radio station is a very close one.

On-line broadcasting is more suited to networks than to community radio. Though it is possible for community radio stations to share programs, and to access the CBAA satellite service, this is not the most desirable way of providing programs of relevance to the local area, so community radio stations should avoid becoming a part of networking for any other purpose than the transmission of national or state news.

The introduction of digital broadcasting may well bring about the demise of small rural stations unable to afford the purchase of the equipment, and with no volunteer technicians able to install it.

The Committee of Management of West Gippsland Community Radio Inc. invites the House of Representatives to consider the following issues:

- What is the comparative cost efficiency of Community Radio against Commercial radio and the ABC?
- If local broadcasting is what the Committee decides that it wants to preserve, what help will the government offer to small rural community radio stations when digital broadcasting becomes compulsory?
- What action can be taken to ensure that all rural communities which want their own local broadcaster can have spectrum made available to them?
- How can the government assist rural broadcasters to continue operations? Recurrent funding according to agreed criteria such as minimum percentages of locally-produced content and Australian music would ensure that the radio stations offering these services can survive.

We understand that the Committee will be visiting regional centres in the course of the enquiry, and we would be very willing to send representatives to give further evidence if required.

Attached is an example of how West Gippsland Community Radio fulfils the requirements of a locally-focused broadcaster.

LYNN WELLS
SECRETARY

On behalf of the Committee of Management

WEST GIPPSLAND COMMUNITY RADIO INC.

The Committee might like to consider an example of how the operations of a small rural Community Radio station, 99.5 3BBR-FM, responds to the needs of the local community.

West Gippsland Community Radio is an aspirant radio station serving the area from Pakenham to Trafalgar, and from Mr Baw Baw to Korumburra.

It is the sole aspirant in the area, and broadcasts 24 hours a day, for the whole year. It was incorporated in November 1993, has been in operation on air continuously since May 1995.

- 1.1 West Gippsland Community Radio is keenly aware of its role in the community. The local focus encourages a sense of unity, affirms regional identity and pride, and rewards local initiatives.
- 1.2 The programming policy is driven by identified community needs. Local organizations are invited to present their own programs, under the guidance of a trained presenter. Music content was determined after a consideration of the demographics of the area and the music styles played by those other radio stations which can be received in West Gippsland, together with a concern that all members of the family should be able to find some program to their individual taste.
- 1.3 West Gippsland Community Radio is open to participation by a wide range of organizations. This participation is increasing as we launch our Federation Celebrations project, which will involve local schools and heritage organizations.
- 1.4 There is an emphasis on Australian content, and on encouraging local musicians and writers.
- 1.5 Interested people with an enthusiasm for music and/or community service are able to enjoy the creative outlet of broadcasting. This can also provide a training ground for people interested in a professional career in broadcasting, and in radio administration, production and sales.
- 1.6 West Gippsland Community Radio provides a forum for local politicians and council representatives to report to the community on their policies and achievements.
- 1.7 For many relatively isolated towns in mountain areas, reception is very limited, and local FM radio is often the only radio service they can access.
- 1.8 West Gippsland Community Radio now provides an overnight music format which entertains travellers, workers and people unable to sleep.
- 1.9 Potential listeners who have trouble with reception have access to a free service which enables their radio to be tuned to FM by an experienced technician.
- 1.10 The policy is to broadcast two free-to-air community service announcements every hour during the day and evening. Particular programs provide further opportunity for local organizations to publicise their causes and their needs.
- 1.11 West Gippsland Community Radio provides PA services to local fairs free of charge, and members assist in the publicity committees of a number of local organizations eg the Drouin Ficifolia Festival.
- 1.12 In case of emergency, West Gippsland Community Radio is willing to provide their broadcasting facilities for the use of emergency services.
- 1.13 The Statement of Purpose of West Gippsland Community Radio Inc. emphasises family values, and this is reinforced by the programming policy which makes it clear that at no time should any member of the community be shocked or distressed by spoken word or lyrics.

- 1.14 West Gippsland Community Radio Inc. takes seriously its obligation to provide a minimum of one hours' religious broadcasting each week, and exceeds this requirement.
- 1.15 Information received from outside West Gippsland is included if it is felt that there are West Gippslanders who would benefit from the information.
- 1.16 Until recently, West Gippsland Community Radio offered a weekly program on job skills and interview preparation, with a feature on jobs available locally. Students from local schools are able to do Work Observation days at the station, and we are an approved organization for the voluntary employment of over-50s.