

DPM:CPL

27 November, 2000

The Committee Secretary,
House of Representatives Communications Committee,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA. ACT2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Radio Industry Inquiry

I refer to the task of the House of Representatives Communications Committee to inquire into and report on the adequacy of radio services in regional and rural Australia and the extent to which there is a need for the Government to take action in relation to the quantity and the quality of radio services in regional and rural Australia.

With regards to this enquiry, I make the following comments against the terms of reference provided.

The social benefits and influence on the general public of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan Australia in comparison to other media sectors.

The Development Council believes that a need existed in the local community to operate its own radio station to provide a local communication medium. The Burdekin is an agricultural based community that has historical links to radio. The area was served by radio 4AY for 53 years until 1989 and is now served by commercial radio stations out of Townsville and ABC Radio. When one considered that the local community radio played such a large part in the lives of the Burdekin community in an historical sense, it is also reasonable to assume that the community would wish to retain and recover such a service.

Accordingly, in 1998 upon finalisation of the Licence Area Plan for Townsville, the Development Council put forward an application for an Open Narrowcast Licence. This application was approved and the Development Council purchased the licence for \$4,000. Since that time, testing was undertaken and the Station officially commenced broadcasting on 28th September, 1999 under the banner of Sweet FM 97.1. The Radio Station programme format allows for a large number of community announcements to be put over free to air.

The beneficiaries of the Radio Station are the Burdekin community in general through the greater provision of local information and the fact that income raised will be circulated within the district and not out of the district.

The Burdekin Development Council is a not for profit organisation, which ensures any revenue raised will be invested back into the community. This has an extremely beneficial community building economic impact.

The programme content of the Radio Station includes local business and tourism related information. This helps promote local businesses and a fledgling tourism industry in the Burdekin region. It will also assist in educating local members of the community as to the assets provided within the Burdekin region.

The benefits to the community are several. Short-term benefits are considered to be as follows :-

- Provides an immediate identity for the Burdekin Community and linkage to its social history.
- Provides information to the touring public.
- Provides a medium for local advertising dollars to be circulated and retained within the community.

Long term benefits include the following :-

- Provides localised information to local residents and listeners such as local events, meetings, news, emergencies, etc.
- Provides a springboard for local groups to interact and communicate within the region.
- Greater community cohesion and better recognition of the contribution of different groups including cultural groups to the social fabric of the community.
- Improved promotion of local businesses and tourism features thereby improving the economic sustainability of those businesses within the community.
- Education of school groups and possible inclusion in secondary school curriculums.
- Positive employment outcomes as a result of the growth of the radio station through the beneficial effect it will have on the business and tourism community.

Although the above comments are obviously directed specifically to the affects or potential affects of having a radio station in the Burdekin community, the potential affects would be considered to be consistent across other regional communities in Australia.

Future Trends in Radio Broadcasting, Including Employment and Career Opportunities in Non-Metropolitan Australia.

Current employment and career opportunities in the Radio industry in non-metropolitan Australia are obviously limited, and in fact are non-existent in cases where radio stations do not exist. The provision of adequate frequency and establishment of radio stations in regional and rural Australia will provide an opportunity for individuals to develop skills in radio broadcasting, thereby improving their chances of employment in the radio industry.

The effect on Individuals, Families and Small Business in Non-Metropolitan Australia of Networking of Radio Programming, particularly in relation to Local News Services, Sport, Community Service Announcements and Other forms of Local Content.

As indicated in comments under the first term of reference above, there is considered to be a beneficial effect on individuals, families and small business of having radio stations within regional and rural Australia. A Radio Station has the characteristic of complementing local media as well as metropolitan radio stations by providing more local content and increased frequency of service. In addition, the opportunity to provide community service announcements free of charge will provide a great benefit to those community organisations.

The Development Council wishes to point out that the current licence expires on 31 July, 2003. Many thousands of dollars have been spent on purchasing the necessary equipment to establish a Radio Station. Under current policy the licence will go to public tender around that time. The obvious danger is that the licence will be purchased by an individual or company with greater resources than the Development Council. There is no guarantee that if the licence is purchased by an individual or company that the same form of radio content (and benefit to the community) will be broadcast or that a radio station

will be operated in the community. Under this scenario, there is the distinct possibility that the Development Council (being a not for profit organisation) could lose substantial amounts of money and the community could lose out on a valuable resource. This should be avoided at all costs.

Other Comment

I also make the following comment in relation to the allocation of a community radio broadcasting service in regional and rural areas. The Development Council has submitted correspondence to the Australian Broadcasting Authority requesting that frequency be allocated and established in respect of a community radio broadcasting service for the Burdekin. I attach copies of the Development Council's letters dated 13th August, 1999 and 9th March, 2000 in respect of this matter.

The Development Council is of the view that allocation of appropriate frequency would be a beneficial planning action for the future. If aspirant community organisations were aware of the availability of such a frequency and/or licence, they would be more inclined to take appropriate action to establish a community radio broadcasting service in their areas.

The provision of frequency or licences in regional and rural Australia, such as the narrowcast licence held by the Development Council does offer considerable benefits to those communities. The Committee should be aware of the possibility of individuals or companies involved in the Radio Industry purchasing such licences for the sole purpose of maintaining a monopoly or restricting competition. In other words, licences are purchased and no radio broadcast is made on that frequency. No radio station is established in the community in which the frequency is available. This is at the least, an inappropriate and immoral use of a Government and community resource and should be avoided at all costs.

I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the radio industry inquiry and trust that these comments will be taken into consideration.

Yours faithfully,

D.P. Mulcahy
SECRETARY