

RADIO ALEXANDRINA (ALEX FM) COMMUNITY BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION INC

SUBMISSION FOR PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY RADIO

Summary

The Community

- Radio Alexandrina (Alex FM) established in November 2001 to serve the community of the Lake Alexandrina geographical area.
- Main industries in area are farming, viticulture and tourism – some light industry.
- One of the fastest growing regions in the country.
- Interests generally historical, water based activities, arts and sport.

The Station

- Fifty members and volunteers – no paid staff.
- Age range fourteen to seventy six – variety of skills and experience
- New volunteers given orientation and training for office and/or presenting and production – little training can yet be given in technical and management areas.
- Some seventy volunteers have passed through training – some have not continued for personal reasons, moving away from area, ill health and some deciding radio was not for them.
- Strong connections with community groups. Joint activities, publicising events, on air interviews.
- Nominated for an SA Great Award for 2005.

Program Content

- One hour aboriginal program.
- Two hour teenage program – possibility of more.
- Specialist music programs – classical, jazz, Celtic.
- All programs except aboriginal are locally produced.
- 6am-9pm live broadcast then computer mix produced by Alex FM.
- Two stations in Victor Harbor broadcast some Fleurieu information, Alex FM is the only one devoted to the Alexandrina area.
- Target is for 25% Australian music content for all programs. Three hours on both Saturdays and Sundays devoted entirely to Australian music.
- Local artists and exhibitions featured. Local writing group has designated weekly segment.
- Weather forecasts broadcast frequently.
- Segments on gardening in the area and local Real Estate news.
- Regular information on tourism, business, community activities and health.

Technical Requirements

- Alex FM's equipment is mainly second hand - purchased or donated.
- Funding limitations inhibit updating with more advanced equipment.
- Recent donation of equipment from another community radio station has eased some shortages.

Opportunities and Threats

- Budget income needed \$1200 per month
- Main income – memberships, donations, fundraising, sponsorship.
- Grants – a substantial grant in 2003, but little since
- Main expenses – rent, insurance, electricity, telephone, maintenance, office expenses.
- Sponsorship is increasing. Businesses now often approach us.
- More funding is needed for better equipment and facilities to become more involved out in the community. Increased involvement when the caravan is ready.
- Community groups approach us to publicise their activities.
- Joint activities with other community organisations on the increase.
- Having to share a frequency is an inhibiting factor in the development of a wider sponsorship base and providing access to more community groups. We live in hope of a fulltime frequency and more power.
- Early difficulties with ABA now resolved.

Ed Jackson
Chairman

COMMUNITY RADIO

Since community radio first came into being in 1972 there have been some significant changes to the ways that people listen to radio and there has also been a big increase in the amount of choices available. The proliferation of VHF FM stations and the use of satellites in place of short wave for long range transmissions are just two examples. In common with technological growth in other fields, the equipment used and the expectations of the user, in our case the listeners, have changed considerably.

It might seem, therefore, that community radio, which is a mainly amateur operation often making do with limited financial resources and equipment of an earlier age, would have no place in such a scene. That assumption is in fact quite wrong, because a community radio station can be a major voice for the community and provide many opportunities for fulfillment for the volunteers within it. Recent surveys, too, show an increasing and significant number of people are tuning into community radio.

Establishment of Alex FM

The idea for establishing Radio Alexandrina (Alex FM) Community Broadcasters Association Inc was conceived in November 2001. We are, therefore, a relatively young station, with recent experience of getting a community radio station off the ground, developing our community involvement, attracting members and volunteers and establishing a sponsorship base.

The idea arose from recognition of the fact that the community in the Lake Alexandrina, Goolwa and Hindmarsh Island area is different in many respects from that of Victor Harbor where the other community radio stations in the area are located.

The major problems at the beginning were raising money to cover setting up expenses met by the steering committee and finding out what had to be done within the law and laid down procedures to start a radio station. Both proved to be difficult to resolve. A significant financial contribution came in 2003 through a substantial grant from the South Australian Government. The generosity of certain individuals, organisations and businesses was also a great help.

Some of the biggest problems we encountered, however, in our first three years were in our dealings with the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). While we received a tremendous amount of help and advice from individuals, the time it took for the Authority to respond and the frequent changes in the officials we dealt with were frustrating.

Our first submission was lost by the ABA for six months. The ABA then decided that we were a suitable organisation for a temporary licence, but required us to come to an agreement on sharing a frequency with an existing Victor Harbor broadcaster and go to air within ten days! Both were impossible requirements. They changed their mind about this then advised us to apply for a permanent licence. The application for this ran to ninety six pages and took nearly three weeks of solid work. The ABA expected to make a decision on the applications by the end of that August. In mid September they requested clarification of some points. Our response ran to another twenty seven

pages and they gave us, with due allowance for time in the mail system, only a week to respond. The verdict on the licence was handed down in early December and permanent licences were awarded to other existing stations.

The ABA appeared not to realise it was dealing with a volunteer organisation, nor to have any appreciation of the time it takes mail to travel between Canberra or Sydney and Goolwa. We calculated that in our first three years we spent two of them in total waiting on decisions from the ABA, yet every time they wanted a response from us we were required to reply rapidly, no matter how much work might be involved.

Over approximately the last two years the situation has changed very much for the better and we have enjoyed a stable and effective working relationship with Catherine Prior in the licensing section. The change in the organisation of the Authority seems to be an improvement.

We were required to conduct a survey to identify a frequency that would be free of interference for a temporary licence to be issued. We did this with some support from the local Rotary Club and applied again for a temporary licence. When the ABA decided, after a period of nearly ten months, in our favour we were required to share this frequency with another broadcaster. We consider this to be unfair as the survey was conducted at our cost.

We have been on air with a temporary community licence since 29 January 2005 between Saturday midnight and Wednesday midday each week. The reduced time available is detrimental to the raising of sponsorship support, confuses the listeners and reduces the amount of community involvement that is able to be put into programming. We have actually been blamed by some listeners for material they found objectionable that was broadcast by the other station sharing the frequency.

While we were waiting for our temporary community broadcasting licence we were offered the use of a narrowcast licence by the licence holder. This is the reason for the two frequencies being mentioned on the letterhead. We have used this to develop the station progressing from computer to live presentation. We now broadcast live between 6am and 9pm and outside those hours operate a computer generated program compiled by Alex FM.

What Alex FM Is Doing Now.

The Community.

The Station serves the community of the Lake Alexandrina geographical area and the south eastern corner of the Fleurieu Peninsula. The historic towns of Goolwa and Strathalbyn are included, with the Lake itself, a significant stretch of the River Murray and its mouth, and the Coorong. There are some patches of light industry, but the main occupation of the region is farming and viticulture, with an increasing amount of tourism. The area is rich in scenic diversity, with riverland, wetlands and wooded hills to attract the visitor. Whales appear close to shore in winter. Water sports, bird watching, artistic pursuits and historical study are some popular activities. It is one of the fastest growing areas in the country in population and allied development. It is changing from being a predominantly weekend centre to becoming

one of permanent settlement. The modern up market housing development at the Marina, Hindmarsh Island has been, and will be, a significant contributor of economic and social change. It contrasts with the historic buildings of the towns and settlements of the area. The people of Alexandrina are very proud of the region's past, with its interesting history of river trade and it being the site of Australia's first railway. There is a successful Tidy Towns committee and more recently a strong movement to have Goolwa declared Australia's first Cittaslow town has been started.

Volunteers.

The Station and Committee of Management are composed completely of volunteers. There are no paid employees. The volunteers range in age from fourteen to seventy six and come with a wide variety of skills and life experience. They represent a good cross section of the community. Several are retired or on some sort of welfare pension, but there are also those in full or part time employment. They devote as much time to the Station as they are able, some come just to present a weekly program and others commit a considerable amount of time to the tasks that have to be done to keep the Station running.

The Station is a participant in Government work for the dole schemes. Several presenters and office staff have come to us under these programs and have gone on to find employment. We believe this shows they have benefited from their experience with us.

We conduct a comprehensive training program for presenters at no charge to them. We also provide training in production and in running the office with appropriate computer operation. We are now on Broadband.

We rely largely on attracting technical and management volunteers with qualifications and experience obtained elsewhere. We have a retired electrical contractor and the proprietor of an electronics and communications company on our Committee of Management and others who have held senior positions in industry, local government and the Public Service.

We have fifty members and a varying number of other volunteers. We ask all presenters of programs to become members.

Several of our members are equally active in other community organisations.

Many of our volunteers, particularly those who are retired, are finding that working with Alex FM provides them with the opportunity to learn new skills, a chance to raise their self esteem, find new confidence and to make new friends.

Programming And Production.

Our policy on programming is that presenters can play the type of music they are happiest presenting. They are representatives of the community and the age range and variety of interests should ensure that all the musical tastes of the community are catered for and in the proportion that reflects the level of interest in a musical style.

We have a magazine style program between 9am and 12 noon during which members of community groups are interviewed, or interesting personalities come and talk about their lives, or special interests. We provide too for casual visitors and tourists to come on air. Our station is situated in one of Goolwa's historic buildings and we often have tourists come in for a "look-see." Some groups attend for an interview on a weekly or monthly basis. Examples of our regulars are the local Business Association, the Tourist Information Centre, Wildlife Welfare, Tidy Towns, the Cittaslow Committee, Cancer Support, Alexandrina Council and arts organisations. Other groups that have appeared include the RSL, Rotary and Lions Clubs (the latter being a member), Seniors Groups, the Astronomical Society and the Model Aircraft Club. Examples of individuals range from local member Alexander Downer, the Mayor, the holder of the record for visual comet discovery, local historians and a walker of the Kokoda Trail.

Alex FM was invited to be the first radio station to put to air a Cd made by the students of Port Elliot Primary School, "Let The Murray Flow." It was later featured on national television.

We have a segment each Sunday for members of a local writing group, the Sandwriters, to read their work on air.

We have each Tuesday afternoon a one hour Aboriginal program which we receive on a Cd from Deadly Vibes in Sydney. Following this program is a two hour segment presented by three grade nine students at Investigator College. We have had a request from a group of grade eight students to present a program which is currently awaiting more input from them.

All our programs apart from the Aboriginal one are produced by Alex FM. We also produce all our sponsorship, promotional and general information messages in our production studio, with voice input from a number of members of the community who are not otherwise engaged at the Station. We encourage local musicians to provide us with jingles for these. While on air our presenters are required to read messages of short term community interest such as advice on local dances, craft sales, or U3A meetings. These can number up to six an hour.

Sponsored program segments include the weather forecast, gardening hints and local real estate information.

Other Community Involvement

Alex FM has close association with a number of other organisations off air as well. These include the holding of live music afternoons in conjunction with the Goolwa Aquatic Club; a fun football match with the local team; sausage sizzles at the "Tour Down Under" and "Jazz On The Water" at the Marina, by invitation; the Goolwa Christmas Pageant; the annual "Goolwa Live" celebrations, an annual Alex FM family day with stalls and local entertainers and the Ghost Tour held at night around Goolwa. This last initiative generated a lot of interest and is now destined to become a regular tourist feature.

We hold an annual Fashion Parade in conjunction with local clothing shops and a hotel or golf club, with a meal and raffles of donated items. They have proved to be successful fund raisers.

We have recently acquired a second hand caravan for which we are seeking funds for refurbishment to enable us to have a more effective presence at local markets and other community events.

Technological Expectations

Because we are still building our financial base there are insufficient funds for us to be too ambitious about technological development. We have relied very much to date on acquiring equipment at a minimum cost or on donations of items. We have been fortunate in establishing a good relationship with a successful Adelaide station which gave us as recently as last week a Paul Kirk desk and other items surplus to their requirements, which we shall utilize to construct a standby/training studio. Progress in the digital area for the foreseeable period will be minimal.

Funding

We estimate that we need to raise a minimum of \$1200 a month to meet our expenses and to provide a small excess for development.

Our main sources of funding are:

- Membership subscriptions
- Donations
- Fundraising events such as the Fashion Shows, sausage sizzles, football match and garage sales
- Sponsorship
- Raffles
- Grants – little success since the substantial grant from the SA Government in 2003. We have received some assistance, both financial and material from Alexandrina Council, but we have had no grants from the Federal Government.

Our main areas of expenditure are:

- Rent of premises
- Insurance
- Electricity
- Telephone
- Maintenance and equipment
- Office supplies and postage
- Fund raising expenses
- Photocopying

More funding would enable us to purchase new equipment which is more reliable than the second hand collection we now have.

It would enable us to employ technicians to install equipment sooner than can be done with volunteers, and provide us with a second studio. Although we have the desk we still need plugs, cables, switches, microphones and microphone stands etc., to complete it.

We could complete the refurbishment of the caravan more easily.

We could provide battery power to maintain our transmission during periods of power blackout. Our computer currently is an older model that will return to a playing mode without need for restarting after a power failure, but it still suffers from blackouts.

We could acquire a transmitter to replace the one currently on loan.

We note that some funding is available through the Community Broadcasting Foundation (CBF), but this is only for stations with a permanent licence. It seems to us that funding is most needed during the early setting up years and we wonder why this restriction has been imposed.

The area of coverage allowed under our licence is an unusual shape to avoid interference with other stations. The power is less than we asked for, for the same reason. Another frequency might enable us to have a wider coverage and more power.

Opportunities And Threats

Our biggest concern is to maintain and expand our sponsorship base to ensure our continuing financial viability.

We are ever conscious of the need to keep our volunteers happy by providing congenial working conditions and equipment of reliable quality.

We approach the future with confidence, based on the feedback that tells us of a growing number of listeners and an increase in the amount of business being conducted by our sponsors.

Also, someone out there must like us, because Alex FM was nominated for an SA Great award in 2005.

Ed Jackson
Chairman