

Wendy Mays
Executive Director
Vermont Association of Broadcasters
Proposal for Coronavirus Relief Funds
Submitted Tuesday, June 9, 2020

Dear Members of Vermont's Energy & Technology Committee,

My name is Wendy Mays and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Association of Broadcasters (VAB), the non-profit trade association that represents over 100 radio and television stations operating throughout the state.

After reviewing the draft committee letter to the House Appropriations Committee, I asked Rep. Tim Briglin if I could testify on the COVID impact to local radio stations and together, we decided submitting this written testimony and proposal is a more efficient way to get you this information.

VAB respectfully requests that any Coronavirus Relief fund allocations include ALL radio stations in Vermont. For the reasons I will outline in this proposal, we encourage your committee to allocate a total of \$5 million dollars in Coronavirus Relief Funds to be divided evenly between 50 stations, including VPR and the 49 commercial radio stations operating in Vermont, so no one organization receives a state-funded competitive advantage over another.

The draft letter proposes to recommend to the House Appropriations Committee \$1 million to compensate Vermont Public Radio for unbudgeted and unplanned specialized learning content and educational programming during school closures. I now understand the amount listed in the June 3rd draft memo to Rep. Toll was more of a placeholder and recommendations are still being discussed. This is a collective sigh of relief to Vermont's commercial radio station owners and General Managers, who are struggling to keep the lights on due their only source of revenue, advertising, being decimated by the response to COVID-19.

Vermont Public Radio is a member of the VAB and we appreciate their contributions during this public health crisis. Since VPR has already testified, I appreciate this opportunity to tell you about the contributions made by Vermont's local commercially-classified radio stations and why they too are asking this committee to allocate Coronavirus Relief Funds to reimburse them for their unbudgeted and unplanned public education content and programming.

No matter their regular format, every radio station operating in Vermont stepped up and started airing an unprecedented amount of segments to keep the public educated and safe from the very beginning of this health crisis. Below is just an example of the types of information stations have been using their airwaves and digital platforms to keep the public educated:

-When schools were closing down, they interviewed principals and school superintendents to let families know what was happening and where and how to pick up remote learning materials.

- When masks and tests were hard to come by, they told people where and when they could find them. Some stations even made masks and passed them out for free!

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- They told people insecure about where their next meal would come from where to pick up donated food. A lot of stations ran fundraisers for their local food shelves, collecting thousands of dollars in donations and non-perishable items.

- News stations doubled or tripled their news programming and non-news stations interrupted their normal music format multiple times a day to air crucial public information like the Governor's press conferences, breaking news and interviews with public officials.

- Last, but certainly not least, every local radio station has aired thousands of minutes/hundreds of hours of COVID-19 public service announcements about how to prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses.

I understand this committee has Federal guidelines for what Coronavirus Relief Funds can be used for. Surely keeping all Vermonters, no matter what age they are, educated on vital health and safety needs, aligns with the Federal Government's intent on how these Coronavirus Relief Funds should be spent.

According to Scott Finn's testimony in your committee June 4, 2020, Vermont Public Radio is seeking \$874,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds for unforeseen expenses and technical upgrades. Every radio station has had unforeseen expenses, has spent a considerable amount of extra resources to air COVID-19 related programming, and they all have technical equipment that needs replacing. Those needs are all going unmet because of the unexpected and devastating blow to their ability to generate any revenue.

I would like to highlight the one big difference between the commercial and non-commercial classification that's important for this committee to understand and that is commercial radio stations have one source of revenue - advertising. Whereas non-commercial stations like VPR have three; Federal funding, public donations and corporate underwriting (a form of advertising). VPR was lucky enough to have recently received an extra grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, but unfortunately, no such organization exists for commercial stations, who, because they are essential, have remained operating and are desperately trying to keep from laying staff off and trying to keep the lights on. WTSA in Brattleboro has been that region's only source of local news for 70 years and is in real danger of having to close for good. If they are gone, who will help nonprofits raise money? Who will sponsor community events? Where will Brattleboro get their local news from when TV news comes from Boston and New York?

That is why this proposal is asking that an equal amount of Coronavirus Relief Funds allocated to VPR also be allocated to each of the 49 commercial radio stations listed below, to reimburse them for their COVID-19 related programming.

Why has this request come to your committee? Because broadcasters have no idea who in the state government looks out for us? I testified about the dire need of broadcasters in House Commerce and Economic Development April 29th, pleading with them to help us, and I've seen the draft bill they are

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going to send to House Appropriations - there is no specific help for broadcasters in it. Certainly, if grant money becomes available, stations will apply for it, but so will VPR.

Setting aside my professional role for a moment, I would like to speak as a mother of two children, ages 7 and 9, enrolled in Shelburne Community School. To say remote learning has been hard on students and parents is a gross understatement. Unless you're going through it, there is no way to explain the mental and physical toll it takes on everyone involved. My husband is an essential worker, so I have been home with our two children, trying to do a full time job, take care of them and be their teacher. Why? Because remote learning consisted of a 30 minute ZOOM call, then the children were supposed to go off and do their math and literacy on their own. Just trying to get them onto the ZOOM call was stressful enough, but trying to get them to work independently on math and literacy afterwards was impossible. Every day was a fight that ended in tears. I would have loved more resources to try to keep my children busy, but I didn't know about the special programming the Agency of Education asked VPR and VTPBS to develop. Why? Because the fact that those programs were available was never conveyed through any school communications. Below is a link to the home page for Champlain Valley Supervisory District, serving Shelburne, Charlotte, Hinesburg and Williston. There is no mention of the educational programming offered by VPR or VTPBS, even under "other resources":

<https://sites.google.com/cvsdvt.org/scs-remote-learning-resources/home?authuser=0>

We appreciate the fact that VPR created a show at the Agency of Education's request (podcast of "But Why" was downloaded by 0.01176% of Vermonters), but the Agency of Education never gave commercial stations that opportunity. If they had, I guarantee some stations would have created long-form educational shows either on-air or on their digital platforms and hundreds of thousands of Vermonters would have been reached. WGMT-FM, Magic 97.7 in St. Johnsbury created educational programming without being asked to. They worked with local schools to give kids "Quests" to do while out of school due to COVID-19. Here is a link to a video where station owner Bruce James channels his inner Mr. Rogers, showing kids what a radio station looks like, what it's like to be a DJ and challenging them to take the quest: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxa6fJ22tv8&authuser=0>. *Side note, Bruce James applied for the \$10,000 emergency grant that was supposed to come with the Economic Injury Disaster Loan and the only help SBA offered him was a \$2,700 loan. That's the reality of the situation.

Every radio station in the state is in need of grant money as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. Most local radio stations have lost between 50-73% of their revenue and some are just trying to stay operating and keep from laying off staff. Here's just an example of some of the losses in revenue in April and May of this year compared to April & May last year and June is looking just as bad:

- Hall Communications stations WOKO, WKOL, WJOY, WIZN, WBTZ = - \$576,797
- VOX AM/FM stations WEZF, WXXX, WCPV, WVTK, WEAV, WXPS, WVMT = - \$439,582
- Catamount Radio stations WDVT, WJEN, WJJR, WSYB, WZRT = - \$185,000
- Radio Vermont Group stations WDEV-FM, WDEV-AM, WCVT-FM, WLVB-FM = - \$119,930
- Great Eastern Radio stations WKKN, WTHK & WWOD = - \$157,182
- WTSA AM & FM = - \$74,606

These stations are all in need of hundreds of thousands of dollars to replace transmitters that are over 20 years old, increase their streaming capacity, buy remote broadcasting equipment to keep their employees social distanced and safe and most of all, money not to create a new position, but to keep those who are already employed from being laid off.

Vermont Association of Broadcasters encourages you to allocate a total of \$5 million dollars in Coronavirus Relief Funds to be divided evenly between 50 stations, including VPR and the 49 commercial radio stations operating in Vermont, so no one organization receives a state-funded competitive advantage over another. This would equate to a \$100,000 grant for each station, which would go a long way in helping them stay in operation.

Below is a list of the 49 commercial radio stations producing original content daily for Vermonters:

Call Letters	Based in...	Moniker	Operated by...
WBTZ-FM	South Burlington	99.9 the Buzz	Hall Communications
WCFR-AM/FM	Springfield	Rewind 106.5	Sugar River Media
WCLX-FM	Bridport	Farm Fresh Radio	Sun Signals, LLC
WCPV-FM	Colchester	101.3 The Game	VOX AM/FM
WCVR-AM/FM	Randolph	North Country 1320/100.1	Sugar River Media
WCVT-FM	Stowe	101 The One	Radio Vermont Group
WDEV-AM	Waterbury		Radio Vermont Group
WDEV-FM	Waterbury		Radio Vermont Group
WDOT-FM	Montpelier	The Point	Montpelier Broadcasting
WDVT-FM	Rutland	Rock 94.5	Catamount Radio
WEAV-AM	Colchester	960 The Zone	VOX AM/FM
WEQX-FM	Manchester	The Alternative	Northshire Communications
WEZF-FM	Colchester	Star 92.9	VOX AM/FM
WGMT-FM	St. Johnsbury	Magic 97.7	VT Broadcast Associates
WIKE-AM	Newport	The Notch	VT Broadcast Associates
WIXM-FM	Colchester	Mix 102.3	Champlain Radio Group
WIZN-FM	Winooski	106.7 The Wizard	Hall Communications
WJEN-FM	Rutland	Cat Country	Catamount Radio
WJJR-FM	Rutland	98.1 JJR	Catamount Radio
WJJZ-FM	Newport	JJ Country 94.5	VT Broadcast Associates
WJKS-FM	Burlington	104.3 KISS-FM	Great Eastern Radio
WJOY-AM	South Burlington	Easier Listening	Hall Communications
WKKN-FM	Westminster	The Peak	Great Eastern Radio
WKOL-FM	South Burlington	KOOL 105	Hall Communications

WKVT-FM	Brattleboro	BrattFM	Monadnock Radio Group
WKXH-FM	Saint Johnsbury	Hot New Country V 105	VT Broadcast Associates
WLVB-FM	Morrisville	Vermont Country 94	Radio Vermont Group
WMOO-FM	Derby/Newport	Moo 92	VT Broadcast Associates
WNCS-FM	Montpelier	The Point	Montpelier Broadcasting
WOKO-FM	Burlington	The Big Station	Hall Communications
WOTX-FM	Lunenburg	The Outlaw	Alexxon Corp.
WRFK-FM	Barre	107.1 Frank FM	Great Eastern Radio
WRJT-FM	Montpelier	The Point	Montpelier Broadcasting
WSNO-AM/FM	Barre	105.7 The Beat	Great Eastern Radio
WSTJ-AM	Saint Johnsbury		VT Broadcast Associates
WSYB-AM/FM	Rutland		Catamount Radio
WTHK-FM	Wilmington	The Peak	Great Eastern Radio
WTNN-FM	South Burlington	Eagle Country 97.5	Impact Radio
WTSA-AM	Brattleboro	The Beast	Four Seasons Media
WTSA-FM	Brattleboro		Four Seasons Media
WTWN-AM	Wells River	The River of Life	Puffer Broadcasting
WVMT-AM/FM	Colchester	News/Talk 620	VOX AM/FM
WVTK-FM	Middlebury		VOX AM/FM
WWFY-FM	Barre	Froggy 100.9	Great Eastern Radio
WWMP-FM	Colchester	Rock 103.3	Champlain Radio Group
WXXX-FM	Colchester	95 Triple X	VOX AM/FM
WXZO-FM	Colchester	96.7 MeTV FM	VOX AM/FM
WYKR-FM	Wells River	Your Country	Puffer Broadcasting
WZRT-FM	Rutland	Z97.1	Catamount Radio