



## Testimony for the Members of the Vermont House Appropriations Committee

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RE: Community Media FY27 Budget Request

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before your committee today in support of community media state funding. I am joined here today by my colleague Paul Snyder, the Director of Northwest Access TV.

As Paul said, together we represent 31 community media organizations across the state, a combination of public access TV and community radio. I too am here to speak in support of and take questions about the Secretary of State's FY27 General Fund Budget line item for \$1.89M for support of community media in Vermont. There is currently a \$540K difference between the Governor's budget, where this funding was level funded at \$1.35M.

I am grateful that there is general agreement, from the Secretary of State, the Governor, your colleagues, and this committee, that public funding for community media is a good investment of state dollars. Thank you all.

I know everyone in this room is acutely aware of how much it not only costs to live in Vermont, but the high cost to do business. This is also true for the cost to do mission-based, non-commercial, non-profit work like community media.

The \$540K that is missing from our full \$1.89M request, via the Secretary of State's budget, includes:

- **\$90K to include 9 community radio stations in with community media funding.** This will allow for statewide collaboration, add live emergency responsiveness to community emergencies by community radio, and dramatically

increase civic engagement through the hundreds of local and live radio shows done by Vermonters in their own communities. The topics of these shows range from interviews with local leaders on local issues, to coverage of local events, weather, and mutual aid needs, to fierce debates on the best way to backyard compost.

- **Meeting, in part, the increased costs to operate our community media organizations – from utilities, to rents, to licensing fees, to staff costs.** Like so many of our nonprofit partners, we are not immune to the high cost of living and doing business in Vermont.
- **Addressing the decline in other revenue sources.** For public access TV, this is the continued decline of cable fees. For community radio, this is the increased competition for already scarce regional and state philanthropy sources for community radio in the wake of the defunding for Corporation of Public Broadcasting last year.

The Secretary of State believes strongly in the importance of community media, as a tool of a vibrant democracy. We are the only media entities, directly accountable to our communities for the coverage and programming we provide. There is no corporate control, there is no bottom line we owe our by-lines to. Community media is made for the people of Vermont, by the people of Vermont. Besides being part of the first amendment – the right to a free press, to hold the government accountable — what happens in community media is about as democratic as it gets. This is why this \$1.89M budget request is so important to get right this year.

As I am here representing community radio, I want to briefly speak to the uniqueness of what we bring to Vermont.

- **We ensure Vermonters have free access to local, regional, and national news and analysis (fact checked, not “fake news”).** At a time when commercial and even public media are being attacked and muted in what news they are covering, community radio stands resolute in our FCC charge – “*to provide content for the good of the community.*” We can do this because community radio is made by the community, led by the community, for the community.
- **We offer immediate, live coverage of local emergencies, like in the recent massive flooding events in the summers of 2023 and 2024.** We are many folks’ go to place for information on community resources, we amplify mutual aid requests, provide local forecasts, and promote community events. We were the trusted source for social connection and needs, long before social media, and we will be here long after it is gone.

- **We connect Vermonters to each other, across the most rural parts of the state.** Through interviews, live performances, in depth conversations on the issues we're facing locally, and mighty fine, human curated music shows, we are tuned into local needs. Hearing each other's voices, stories, and experiences—especially when they are different from our own—is more important than ever.
- **Most importantly, we are free for all Vermonters.** There are no paywalls, no subscription fees. There are also no algorithms or AI in our studios, just real Vermonters broadcasting what their communities want and need, live, everyday.

**Lastly, community radio is growing here in Vermont.** As part of supporting this full \$1.89M funding in the FY27 Budget, you are helping to support three new community radio stations going on the air this year, in Bristol, Richmond, and Ludlow, alongside 6 other existing stations. At a time when media in Vermont is declining with newspapers closing and existing TV or commercial stations being sold to out of state entities, *we are adding community-owned radio stations*. That is a huge deal.

For context on our impact and reach to Vermonters, Vermont Public estimates they reach around 300K Vermonters (on radio and online). *Combined, the current 6 community radio stations on the air reach 325K Vermonters, with more on the way thanks to WGDR's new antenna and the 3 new stations coming on the air this year.*

The \$90K included for community radio in this \$540K ask would mean **that for just 25 cents a year**, the state would assure these Vermonters have everyday access to local news, information, and connection, as well as a go to place to tune into during emergencies.

Further, as the Director of Central Vermont Community Radio – the stations of WGDR, Plainfield and WGDH, Hardwick – I am proud to report that our listenership has dramatically increased since we took over ownership from Goddard College in 2021. Back then, there were around 13K listeners a year. Now, under community ownership, we have 45K listeners. That is a 250% increase and it is not by luck, it is by design. It is because our station has dedicated ourselves to being hyper locally focused in our programming. Everything I just shared – especially our emergency response – has made many, many more Vermonters turn to us, including many online outside of our broadcast reach, because they want to hear what is going on in their communities everyday. No other media platform covers the community like we can.

And, thanks to legislative funding we received last year for one-time emergency upfit funding, WGDR, at 91.1 FM is about to add all of Barre and Montpelier – another 20K

households – to our listening reach. For these communities, we will become another critical source of help when flooding or other local emergencies return to their downtowns and neighborhoods. When the power goes out, when the internet drops, when cellphones run out of power, folks can still use their radios in their cars or battery operated ones at home to find out how to get help and give help.

The state's investment last year of \$25K for this new antenna means it cost the state just \$1.25 per new Vermonter we will reach with this new broadcast coverage. It is actually even better ROI than that, because radio antennas last for more than 30 years. **This means it is actually a cost of just 4 cents per new listener in Barre and Montpelier to have this public service for the next three decades.**

This new antenna just got approved by the FCC and it will go up at its new location right at the end of your session in May. Something everyone under this golden dome can be very proud of.

Together, with community radio joining with public access TV, we reach 94% of Vermonters. There are hundreds of thousands of folks accessing our broadcasts, livestreams, and archives every single month. We are trusted, we are reliable, we are an essential to our communities.

The return on the investment of \$1.89M in public funding for community media is something we can all be proud of. Again, thank you for your time to speak today and hopefully, your full support for our full funding request. I am happy to answer any questions.

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