

Senate Government Operations Committee Testimony

Restore Community Radio Grant Program and Funding, H.397

Thank you to the Senate Government Operations Committee for this opportunity to speak to you about H.397 (draft 2.5). My name is Llu Mulvaney-Stanak, I'm the station manager for the two community radio stations of WGDR, Plainfield & WGDH, Hardwick. There are 5 other community radio stations here in Vermont and 3 more being built later this year. With a total of 10 stations, we will cover most of the state.

I am here to speak to the vital role community radio plays, especially for rural Vermonters and restore Section 9 to H.397, for the one time community radio grant program.

Our programming is hyper local, made by folks from the listening community. It covers a range of local issues, news, and happenings, and we have great music shows.

These stations are part of folks' everyday lives on the way to work and school, cleaning out the barn, or shoveling out the driveway.

The stations matter because they invite Vermonters to talk to one another and listen, truly listen.

During covid and still, for folks living in isolated rural areas, community radio can also be the main way some connect to their community. This is especially true for elders who often don't have access to internet, cable connection, or cell phones.

Lastly, these stations are there for us the worst of times. When roads wash out, downtowns flood, or ice storms cut power for days on end, these stations have risen to the moment. They can offer immediate coverage of local emergencies, how to get help, how to give help, and how to find resources for recovery.

Community radio is primed for this kind of responsive emergency programming. We are made by locals, for locals, and able to pivot programming whenever needed.

During the massive July flooding over the last two years, WGDR and WGDH provided days and weeks of coverage including mutual aid, shelter location, how to access FEMA and SBA, and frankly, just some respite from the unrelenting recovery work. We heard from hundreds of folks just how much this helped.

These stations are an example of Vermonters at their best, working together across differences and challenges of all sorts, to ensure we stay connected.

While radio is free, running a station is not. These 10 stations are nearly exclusively volunteer run. They operate on budgets of \$25K or less. And, none receive public funding.

The broadcast gear we rely on is the most expensive part of the stations. Transmitters, audio chain gear, and generators can add up to most of an annual operating budget. Antennas alone can cost up to \$25K. The good news is that this is gear that is built to last – in many cases for decades! It is why community radio can be still on the air when there is no internet or cell service.

Of the existing 7 stations, most are now reaching their 10, 20 or in the case of WGDR, 50-year milestones and are in need critical gear upgrades. The 3 new stations, need funding to help raise antennas to cover the Addison County, the Ludlow area, and the Richmond valley.

At the start of the session, we worked with House Government Operations & Military Affairs to present a stand-alone bill, H.307, that would provide one time state grant funding for stations to upgrade gear. **At a total cost of just \$205,000**, all 10 of these stations would be able to make critical broadcast gear upgrades. This would include moving antennas to better broadcast and less flood prone locations. Replacing transmitters, adding generators, and other audio chain upgrades.

House Government Operations & Military Affairs understood the importance of community radio in emergencies and in everyday life. They enthusiastically approved H.307, voting it out of committee 11-0. Through this process, we also gained support from the Vermont Emergency Management Office and General Knight of the Vermont National Guard. Both are eager to partner with all these stations for future emergency needs, knowing now just how reliable we are.

The bill got combined into the larger H.397, as part of flood emergency planning and response. A further sign of the value legislators put on community radio. Along the way, through our community advocacy, we've also built a large base of support from state Representatives and Senators.

Despite all of this, when the bill made it to House Appropriations, all funding was stripped out. Including the section 9 that had this one-time community radio grant in it.

As I conclude, I want to ask your committee to return section 9 to H.397 (draft 2.5), as it was written with the \$205K in one time funding. We see this as not only critical to Vermont's future emergency response, but a great return on state funds.

With our combined broadcast reach, these 10 community radio stations are heard by at least 250,000 Vermonters across just about every county. **This would be a cost of less than \$1 per Vermonter over the next ten years.**

We are very sensitive to the funding constraints the state is facing with uncertain federal funding sources. We originally believed remaining ARPA money might fund small program. However, given the House Appropriations response, we are pivoting to work with our colleagues with the VT Access Network, to potentially seek funding via the Secretary of State's office. We would be added to the existing funding that supports public access TV in the state.

We believe, that if your committee restores the community radio grant program and funding to H.397, that the Senate Appropriations Committee will be agreeable to the SOS as a funding source.

Thank you very much for the time to speak to you today about community radio. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, if there is still time.