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Controversy Swirls Around Proposed Sale of 89.3 FM License from UMass Dartmouth to RIPR

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth is asking the FCC for permission to sell 89.3 FM, currently operating as WUMD, to Rhode Island Public Radio (RIPR), the local NPR affiliate. This would mark the fourth local station controlled by RIPR, along with 88.1 FM, 91.5 FM, and 102.7 FM. RIPR plans to move the broadcast signal from Dartmouth, MA to Tiverton, RI to improve their Rhode Island coverage.

In a press release, RIPR's CEO and general manager, Torey Malatia admitted that "we don't know exactly" whether this acquisition will provide RIPR the statewide coverage that they desire, and in fact, they may well absorb additional area stations beyond the four (including WUMD) that they have already taken over.

Additionally, he admits that RIPR will further require a multi-million-dollar capital campaign to cover transmitter relocation and other expenses. The proposed takeover has met with quite a bit of skepticism from many affected in the listening area. A main concern has been the secretive nature of the negotiations between RIPR and university administration.

The university did not solicit input from WUMD staff or management, UMass Dartmouth students, or the general public, including station listeners. Given that both RIPR and UMass Dartmouth are allegedly operating in the public trust, this sort of closed-door approach is worrying.

The timing of the public announcement was also a bit suspicious, coming in the form of a "done deal" press release on January 4th, conveniently timed for when UMass Dartmouth students are all away on winter break. Station management has also been prohibited from making any comment on the proposed sale and transfer. One alleged benefit to the school of the sale and transfer is the opportunity for UMass Dartmouth students to serve as interns at RIPR.

Malatia referred to making arrangements with UMass Dartmouth's journalism program; however, a visit to the UMass Dartmouth website reveals no journalism major or program, just a couple of introductory journalism class electives within the English major.

Furthermore, the RIPR online schedule lists only nationally-syndicated content, raising the question of what the local "journalistic experience" would be. In a filing with the FCC, RIPR rather dubiously claimed that the loss of WUMD will not deprive the South Coast area of its only local service, as "noncommercial education FM station WTKL will continue to serve the community." However, WTKL is merely a local affiliate of Christian radio giant K-LOVE, and produces no local content – WTKL doesn't even have its own local website or local studio, and KLOVE's "educational" component is targeted to a limited Christian audience.

WUMD in its current form, on the other hand, balances nationally syndicated alternative news and commentary shows such as Democracy Now! and Counterspin with unique locally-produced content like State of the Queer Nation (LGBTQ issues) and Spoiler Alert Radio (behind-the-scenes filmmaking interviews). These local shows are produced and broadcast weekly in dedicated times slots, unlike RIPR's schedule which mixes in occasional local programming segments amongst primarily generic syndicated content like BBC News (comprising one-third of the weekday programming schedule) and All Things Considered.

Fans of independent and eclectic music (not to mention independent musicians seeking avenues of exposure) will certainly be disappointed by the shift in programming focus. RIPR has essentially no

music programming, whereas WUMD is over 80% music – from jazz to reggae to metal to world music to folk to indie rock.

On the educational front, WUMD has a unique program Rock N Roll High School, where local high school students can try their hands at on-air hosting, recording and audio production, as well as being exposed to all sorts of genres of music that they could not discover on commercial radio. Unlike RIPR's approach of rebroadcasting national content and having a skeleton crew to operate locally, WUMD has actively engaged in student and community outreach in its forty-five years of existence.

The station currently allows community members to participate in programming, providing unique educational and volunteer opportunities that a small outlet of a national organization like NPR cannot match. Just one such example is that of DJ Joe Frezza, host of Blitzkrieg, a two-hour weekly metal show. Regarding the impact of WUMD on his life, Joe says "Being autistic, I always grew up feeling like I never belonged anywhere. And that I never fit in, so I stopped trying. So, growing up ... it was really hard for me to express myself and have a place to call home, where I could fit in. When I found WUMD (back then it was known as WSMU), I feel like I finally mattered and that I fit in somewhere." On air after local indie-radio icon Ed Slota's acclaimed Citibeat program, Joe forged a bond with the veteran DJ. "As I was listening to his show, I was floored at just how good he was. This man knew his music. As the years went on, I considered him to be a friend. And someone I consider an invaluable asset to the station." RIPR does not provide such opportunities to the public.

Several other DJs will be made homeless by the transition. For example, David Reis has been a jazz DJ for over twenty-five years, initially recruited by the station because of his involvement with jazz as a historian. Over that time, he has received countless calls from listeners thanking him and even developing friendships of sorts with the loyal listeners. Not everyone has computers and internet access; others listen while at work and/or on the road.

The loss of the on-air signal leaves a void for those people, and whereas NPR has several alternative outlets with similar content, WUMD's programming is unique. Another veteran DJ, Sara Shaughnessy, has been at the station since the age of seventeen. She has been involved in station promotions and as local music director for several years as well. The station has always been an asset to the local music, arts, and non-profit community. DJs have hosted several live performances in the studio over the years and has acted as hub where local musicians can have their music heard first.

Adam Lawrence, a UMass Dartmouth alumnus who in addition to producing State of the Queer Nation hosts a music show, pointed out that he gets feedback from listeners from Rhode Island, along the Route 24 corridor, or Martha's Vineyard who said that they stumbled on WUMD while scanning their FM dials. A shift to online-only would make discovery much more difficult – he explains "the sheer magnitude of music available online makes WUMD a needle in an absolutely enormous haystack – and to be frank, we simply don't have the sort of money on hand required to effectively promote ourselves (and despite the University's windfall from the proposed sale, only a disturbingly small sliver of that money will find its way back to WUMD.)"

DJ Ed Slota concludes, "For the university to cede a valuable and irreplaceable radio frequency to the state of Rhode Island is unconscionable and an insult to Massachusetts taxpayers who help fund the university system. This loss of an important, free over-the-air broadcast outlet which the local community depends on for programming unavailable elsewhere will be another victory for the consolidation of the public airwaves into the hands of a small number of corporations."

The station members are not going down without a fight and have started on a #SaveWUMD campaign on social media with a dedicated page. The campaign is seeking community members to join their voices in opposing this maneuver on the part of the university and RIPR. The public is able to petition against this sale until February 3rd, either by emailing Tom.Wheeler@fcc.gov or writing a petition to deny. More information on the petition process as well as other updates can be found at the #SaveWUMD Facebook page at: <http://tinyurl.com/savewumd>.