

Before the
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington D.C. 20554

In the Matter of)
) MM Docket No. 99-25
Creation of a Low)
Power Radio Service) RM-9208
) RM-9242

To: The Commission

COMMENTS OF AMANDA HURON

1. Why we need a lowpower FM radio service.

I am writing to express my support for the creation of a lowpower FM radio service. Lowpower radio could serve very important community-building functions. It could bring people together to create their own means of communication with their neighbors, as well as providing a venue for music and opinions rarely heard on large radio stations, both commercial and public. Let me share one of my personal reasons for becoming interested in the issue of lowpower radio.

For the past year and a half, I taught radio production to young people in an after-school program at the Latin American Youth Center, in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of D.C. I worked with a very diverse group of kids, hailing from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Nigeria, and the former Zaire, as well as from the United States. They all live in the neighborhoods of Mt. Pleasant, Columbia Heights and Adams Morgan, and attend high school in the area. They are very interested in using radio to air community issues. For instance, in April, four youth spent several weeks interviewing other kids about issues of violence and safety; we edited these interviews and they played the final tape at a forum at the Mt. Pleasant Library on violence and safety in our neighborhood. The audience, which was mostly made up of adults active in the community, was very interested in the interviews these youth had conducted, and asked them many questions about their perspectives on violence and safety. At the end of the forum, the young people were invited to share their tape at the next police meeting, and an American University professor asked if she could use their interviews in a paper she was writing on urban violence.

Sitting in the basement of the library, listening to the words and voices of kids who would probably never actually come to a community meeting, was a powerful experience. Young people in our neighborhood are not ordinarily heard by adults in decision-making positions. But their perspectives – especially on such issues as police harassment and police brutality, of which many youth spoke – are important. Imagine

how powerful it would be if these young people's words were heard, not just by the fifty people in that room, but by the thousands of people who live in our neighborhood, over the airwaves through our own community radio station?

For the past several months, we have been searching for an on-air outlet for these young people. We would like them to have a weekly show, made up of music, interviews, and discussion of important issues. But there are no stations in D.C. appropriate for these kids. The big commercial radio stations require a level of polished professionalism that these kids simply do not yet have; these stations are also unlikely to devote the kind of airtime these kids need to really delve into issues in a significant way. And the non-commercial stations, though they are more open to longer-form discussions of community issues, are becoming more and more locked into their formats, with little room for a brand new weekly show run by teenagers. We have spoken with several of the local college carrier current stations, and in fact will be working this summer with Howard University's carrier current station, WHBC. The kids are excited about being "on the air" on this station – but the fact is that, because WHBC is wired only to the Howard campus, no one in these kids' neighborhoods will hear them over the air. It will be fun, and worthwhile practice, but their voices and perspectives will not actually be heard by their families and neighbors.

We need a radio alternative – something between a huge station that covers the D.C. metropolitan area, and a tiny station that only covers a college campus. Lowpower radio is the answer: a place where kids and other community residents can come together to share ideas and information, tell stories, play music, read poetry, and work together on a common project in which we can all share. It could be a valuable training ground for the youth I worked with, most of whom are interested in careers in journalism and broadcasting. It could provide an immediate outlet for their concerns. And no, it would not sound as professional as commercial or public radio – but it would be real community people telling real stories, and being heard. This summer I am teaching radio production to a new group of teenagers, at Martha's Table, a social services center on 14th Street in Northwest D.C. My hope is that someday the young people from Martha's Table and the Latin American Youth Center can meet each other and work together, along with community residents of all ages, on a neighborhood radio station, sharing their dreams and problems and building a stronger community in the process.

2. Specific suggestions for such a service.

A lowpower radio service should be small in scale; the very nature of such a service is to serve geographically small communities. I recommend that the Commission adapt the 10-100 watt service, not the 1000 watt service. A thousand watts is too large; such stations would not fit into most large urban markets. In dense urban markets such as New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Washington D.C, power levels could even be capped at 25 watts, to allow more stations without problems of interference. A 25-watt station could still reach several neighborhoods effectively.

The service should be non-commercial. If the priority is to increase community access to the airwaves, the stations must not rely on advertising dollars to exist. Lowpower radio can be done quite cheaply, and can be financed on a small scale by community groups using creative methods (e.g. membership, benefit concerts, etc.). Like public parks and public schools, these stations should be kept free of commercial influence.

Any station owner should only be allowed to own a single station. Since the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, consolidation of radio station ownership has been massive. In order to ensure that the new service represents a diverse array of public opinion and culture, the Commission should limit ownership to one station, one owner.

3. Summary.

I am delighted that the FCC is so interested in the issue of lowpower radio. As a teacher of young people and as a member of a diverse urban neighborhood, I fully support you in your efforts to begin offering licenses for lowpower stations. Lowpower radio is cheap, accessible and relatively simple. Licensing lowpower stations would be an effective way to encourage community dialogue and increase communication between different groups of people. Though we all live in the same neighborhood, we don't often stop to talk to each other. Lowpower radio can change that. I urge you to ensure that lowpower FM becomes a reality.

Respectfully submitted,

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July 12, 1999