

Can NJN and NJ News Survive Twin Threats?

Governor Christie proposal to cut funding to New Jersey Network while privatizing it would devastate coverage of New Jersey news and public affairs. NJN is the only broadcaster to provide comprehensive coverage of New Jersey news with its nightly news program.

While the amount of the cut in state funding for NJN is modest (\$2 to \$9 million) compared to the overall budget cuts, it will be a crippling blow to news coverage. Taken together with the downsizing of other New Jersey news sources -- closing of the New York Times Trenton bureau, the layoff of half the Star-ledger reporting staff in October 2008, similar layoffs at papers throughout the state - the last thing New Jersey needs is to lose another state news source.

While the state currently provides funding for only about 40% of NJN's expenses, other major sources of funding for public broadcasters like corporate underwriting and membership are reeling from the recession. Taken together with years of cuts to NJN's state funding, NJN has an on-going structural deficit.

NJN's role in providing New Jersey cultural, minority and historical programming is also threatened as well as its function as the New Jersey provider of emergency broadcast services.

Why a state operated TV network?

In his budget speech, Governor Christie asked why the state operates a television network. The reason is simply and clear -- because no one else would. NJN, formally the New Jersey Public Broadcast Authority, was only formed after repeated failed attempts to get commercial broadcasters to cover New Jersey affairs. Even though many commercial stations are technically licensed in NJ, the lure of the huge NYC and Philly markets meant they became NYC or Philly stations with only occasional NJ stories.

Unlike New York and Philly no non-profit stepped forward to operate a public television network in New Jersey.

Faced with this situation, the legislature established NJN to fill the void. New Jersey joined twenty other states including Maryland and Rhode Island that operate public broadcasting networks. In still other states, the public university operates the public broadcasting network. Most states have some type of public broadcast networks.

Many of the states that operate broadcast networks are classic red states like Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota and Alabama. Why have conservative, Republican states opted for the state solution for public broadcasting? Simply because they, like New Jersey, had to -- commercial broadcasters provided inadequate coverage and no well-heeled non-profit operator appeared to provide the service. These networks have also become the obvious choices to provide emergency broadcast systems.

Would a non-profit NJN work today?

The union represented staff at NJN are dedicated to providing New Jersey based broadcasting. They overwhelmingly oppose any takeover of NJN by a non-profit operator (privatization.)

They oppose privatization for two related reasons. NJN's broadcast licenses, towers, studios and equipment are a major asset worth several hundreds of millions of dollars that the state should not give away. Secondly, retention of the broadcast licenses by the state is the only way to insure that coverage of New Jersey news, culture, history and public affairs continue.

The formation of a non-profit operator of NJN especially in these hard times will inevitably lead to pressure to merge services and operations with NYC and/or Philly broadcasters that ultimately will endanger New Jersey content. This is illustrated by the decision last August by WHYY, the Philly pubcaster, to end it's nightly news show that covered Delaware affairs.

Like New Jersey, Delaware lacks local television coverage and WHYY, whose license is formally assigned to Wilmington, provided that coverage for many years. But when the layoffs and funding cuts that have hit public broadcasting nationally hit WHYY, it pulled the plug on Delaware news in favor of Philly based coverage.

How Can NJN Survive in the 21st Century?

Staff at NJN through their union, the Communications Workers of America, have identified a plan for NJN's survival in the 21st Century.

Changes are needed at NJN to address fundamental problems. Funding for NJ affairs is inadequate and uncertain, procurement of equipment byzantine, and hiring is difficult.

NJN needs to be nimbler in its business and production operations.

Two big changes are needed.

There must be a dedicated, on-going source of funding for NJN that is not dependent on annual appropriations. This funding source is needed regardless of whether NJN continues as a state agency or moves towards another model.

The structure of NJN within the state umbrella must be changed. A New Jersey Public Media Corporation should be formed so that NJN can be more autonomous in equipment procurement, leasing its assets, hiring staff, and providing a form of organization that will be more donor friendly.

The New Jersey Economic Development Authority which is known as a well run organization with appropriated checks and balances is a model for NJN.

Act to protect New Jersey news and democracy

It's important that people who believe that news about public affairs is imperative for democracy to function contact the legislators who will decide the fate of NJN and New Jersey news and public affairs programming.

Reform of and dedicated funding for NJN has not been a priority. In this time of crisis it must and can become a priority if we demand it of our representatives.

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