

Bipartisan support key to proposed expansion of low-power radio

WASHINGTON - Imagine a bill that has bipartisan support in both houses of Congress. Given the recent wrangling on many bills that have gotten more publicity, one might think such a thing doesn't happen anymore.

But in fact, the Local Community Radio Act, which would reauthorize the Federal Communications Commission to grant licenses to low-power FM radio stations and implement recommendations from an FCC report on low-power FM service, is just such a bill.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have long supported low-power radio. Many Catholic organizations, from dioceses to parish-based groups, have applied for low-power licenses.

Introduced in the House by Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Pa., the bill has 86 co-sponsors, ranging from longtime liberal Democratic Rep. Charles Rangel of New York to Rep. Joe Wilson, the Republican from South Carolina who shouted "You lie!" during President Barack Obama's health care speech.

The bill cleared the House Energy and Commerce Committee Oct. 15 - on a voice vote, no less.

The Senate version, sponsored by Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., has bipartisan support - tripartisan if you include Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont. Co-sponsoring on the GOP side of the floor is Sen. John McCain, last year's Republican candidate for president. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation debated the bill Nov. 19, accepted three amendments to the legislation - two from Democrats and one from a Republican, all of which had previously been attached to the bill in past years - and passed it, also on a voice vote.

Low-power radio's growth has been stymied for much of the decade because of broadcaster concerns that the signals of low-power stations would interfere with

their own signals. But a \$2.2 million study mandated by Congress showed that interference would be negligible. In fact, a couple of members of Congress who had sided with the broadcasters nine years ago in calling for the study now are Local Community Radio Act co-sponsors.

Because of the study and the moratorium on low-power licenses that accompanied it, the largest metropolitan area with low-power FM is Richmond, Va., the nation's 50th-largest media market. Were the act to be signed into law, a flood of applications is expected from civic and religious groups from bigger cities.

Religious broadcasters could use low-power FM to air the material they choose. Civic and community groups could broadcast public-service programming. Others, like KPVL in Postville, Iowa, add genres of music ignored by commercial broadcasters to the broadcast day.

"This bill has passed unanimously out of Senate committee twice now," said Diane Foglizzo, a Catholic who is a policy analyst for the Prometheus Radio Project, one of the supporters of low-power radio.

What accounted for the holdups in the past? "Getting things out of the Senate is difficult no matter what you're working on," she replied. "For the first time we have the bill moving out of committee in the House, and I think that points to actual passage of the bill and the bill landing on the desk of the president at some point."

Gary Galloway, emergency management and 911 director for Newton County, Miss., came to Washington in mid-November to lobby Congress on the bill. "They weren't committed. We tried to feel them out and see how the senator or congressman would vote," he told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Nov. 17 while waiting for a flight back to Mississippi. "But I think we got through to 'em and I don't think we're going to have a problem."

Galloway had never heard of low-power radio until he was part of the emergency response team that flocked to Hancock County, on Mississippi's Gulf Coast, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"When we were there, we did an incident action plan every day," Galloway said

“When we finished the IAP for the next day we’d always go to WQRZ. The (low-power) radio station was right in the emergency operations center.

“All of us would be in the radio station, telling the public vital information. For instance, where to pick up water, ice, MREs (meals ready to eat), where to go apply for assistance,” he said. “This was vital, factual information we were able to disseminate over the radio, and it was timely.”

Even though low-power stations typically serve only a particular town or neighborhood, “I’m told there were people in Pearl River County and Harrison County” listening to WQRZ, Garrison said. “I was just blown away with the power of it (and its potential to serve) when disaster happens.”

Newton County, population 23,000, has no radio station of any kind. “We can pick up radio stations from the next county over, Lauderdale County,” Galloway said, “but we’d like to have our own.”

Getting this far on the issue is a new experience for Foglizzo. Now that the both chambers of Congress have the bill, “we’ll see what the next steps are,” she said, “and get it out.”