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Critics say WWOR isn't their '9 Jersey'

Group to oppose TV station's license renewal at FCC hearing

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To critics of the TV station, WWOR's nickname says it all.

It's featured on the station's Web site, my9ny.com.

It also greets visitors entering its headquarters in Secaucus. Against a backdrop of the New York City skyline is the nickname "My 9 New York."

"It says they truly and completely identify themselves as part of the New York media market," said Donna Sandorse of Voice for New Jersey, a nonprofit group challenging WWOR's license renewal.

She and other critics will have a chance to air concerns about WWOR's commitment -- or lack thereof -- to New Jersey programming tonight when the Federal Communications Commission holds a public hearing on a broadcast license renewal for WWOR (Channel 9), the only commercial VHF television station licensed in New Jersey.

Channel 9 moved from New York City to Secaucus in 1986 to comply with a federal law requiring the FCC to set aside at least one VHF license for every state. As part of an FCC order on the issue, the commission said Channel 9 had an obligation to "operate in New Jersey for the benefit of the people in the state."

But over the years, critics have accused WWOR of failing to meet those obligations.

In its challenge, Voice of New Jersey cites WWOR's own FCC "Service to New Jersey" reports indicating the station ran 1,354 New Jersey news stories between 1999 and 2006, an average of fewer than 170 stories a year, or one every two days. The petition also noted that many of the stories dealt with "lurid, tabloid" issues of murder and other crime.

"New Jersey does get short shrift," Sandorse said, claiming WWOR also runs just an hour a week of public interest programming devoted to New Jersey.

Audrey Pass, a spokeswoman for WWOR, defended the station's New Jersey coverage, citing the regular 10 p.m. nightly newscasts.

"I'd be surprised if a day went by where there wasn't a New Jersey story or a story of interest to New Jersey residents," she said.

She also cited the hour of weekly New Jersey public affairs programming on which "numerous local politicians and local community leaders" have appeared, as well as breaking news reports, such as severe weather and traffic warnings, election results and live broadcasts of addresses by Gov. Jon Corzine.

"We will have a presentation at the hearing and welcome the opportunity to showcase WWOR/My 9's commitment to the people and communities of New Jersey," Pass said.

The hearing will be from 4 to 6 p.m. at Rutgers-Newark's Paul Robeson Campus Center on Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Critics argue things worsened after 2001 when Channel 9 was acquired by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., which also owns the Fox channel in New York, WNYW (Channel 5), and the New York Post.

WWOR closed its news bureau in Trenton, the seat of state government, and three years ago reversed plans to consolidate operations with WNYW in New York City after coming under fire from critics and New Jersey's congressional delegation.

The United Church of Christ and the Rev. Jessie Jackson's Rainbow/Push Coalition also oppose WWOR's license renewal on the grounds of multiple media ownership in the same market.

News Corp. has been operating under FCC waivers of the cross-media ownership rules since acquiring WWOR. The station filed for a seven-year license renewal in February, and the challenges were filed in May.

Tonight's public hearing was convened after U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg requested it last summer in a meeting with FCC Chairman Kevin Martin.

"New Jersey deserves its own television station -- and Channel 9 is supposed to be it," Lautenberg said yesterday in a statement. "But time and again, this station has failed to provide adequate coverage of issues important to our families and our local communities."

Members of Voice for New Jersey said they do not expect the FCC to deny WWOR's license renewal, but hope the commission will impose conditions requiring specific and measurable improvements in New Jersey programming.

"Realistically, we don't expect them to lose their license," Sandorse said. "But we would like to see them meet some sort of standards for their coverage of New Jersey."

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