

## Campaign watchdogs challenge licenses of area TV stations

Objections filed to renewing licenses of commercial TV stations

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Public-interest groups are challenging the broadcast license renewals of eight Portland-Salem television stations, charging they fail to provide enough news coverage of local elections.

The Money in Politics Research Action Project, acting in tandem with other Oregon and national watchdog groups, filed petitions Friday with the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D.C., The petitions object to granting eight-year license renewals that are pending for all area commercial stations: KATU 2, KOIN 6, KPTV 12, KGW 8, KPXG 22, KNMT 24, KRCW 32 and KPDX 49.

"They're using the public airwaves for free and, in return, they're supposed to meet public-interest obligations," said Janice Thompson, director of the money in politics group. "It seems like the very least they could do is to provide information to voters to make informed decisions on their ballots."

Calls to three general managers of Portland TV stations were not returned this afternoon.

The complaint is based on a study of the four major Portland TV stations' 2004 elections coverage. That showed the four stations ran only six stories combined about local elections during the final month of the campaign, though there was a hot race for Portland mayor at the time and a close race for a Portland City Council seat. There were only eight stories about Oregon legislative races.

The study found that 5 percent of news stories were dedicated to elections coverage, but the lion's share covered the presidential race.

The skimpy coverage of local elections comes in contrast to the money the stations were making on political ads, Thompson said. She said the goal of the complaints is to pressure the stations to improve coverage of local elections.

Veteran Oregon political consultant Pat McCormick said the challenge to TV station licenses appears "somewhat quixotic." It's very difficult to get the FCC to deny a TV license renewal, he said.

All media tend to focus on controversial election angles rather than educational pieces, McCormick observed. Television stations and newspapers are offering lighter fare in response to changing viewer and reader demand and interest, he said.

Washington, D.C.-based Media Access Project worked with Thompson to challenge the Portland TV licenses, and filed similar challenges last year to Chicago and Milwaukee, Wisc. TV stations.

"We have no expectation that the FCC under present management is likely to act favorably on these petitions," said Andrew Schwartzman, Media Access Project chief executive. TV licenses have rarely been denied since the media deregulation begun under President Reagan in the 1980s, Schwartzman said.

However, he said Portland TV stations should not dismiss the challenges. His group could go to court if the FCC does not respond favorably. And the FCC has delayed license renewals for the Chicago and Milwaukee stations for 14 months, and counting, he said.

"I think they ignore it at their risk."

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