

WWOR license under fire

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► **Correction**

NEWARK – Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg and spokesmen for several community organizations asked the Federal Communications Commission on Wednesday to reject WWOR-TV's application for a license renewal unless the station improves its coverage of New Jersey.

But supporters of the station, including leaders of several other community groups, said that Channel 9, the only major commercial station licensed in the state, has been a valuable asset to the state and deserves to be licensed for an additional eight years.

"Channel 9 is based in New Jersey; it's time for the FCC to make sure it covers New Jersey," Lautenberg, D-N.J., said in opening remarks at the two-hour public forum at Rutgers University.

"If the FCC renews Channel 9's license, it needs to get tough and make certain that New Jersey gets the news coverage it needs and deserves," he said.

To retain its license, WWOR should commit to keeping its news department and production studios in New Jersey, identify itself as a New Jersey station, and meet specific, measurable goals for its coverage in the state, he said.

The battle over the renewal is centered on a 1982 agreement engineered by former Sen. Bill Bradley, in which the station's previous owner was allowed to retain its license only if the station would move its studio and offices to New Jersey from New York "and operate in New Jersey for the benefit of the people in [the] state."

The agreement said Channel 9 "will not be a New Jersey station in name only. It will serve the people of New Jersey."

Wednesday's forum was scheduled under pressure from Lautenberg after several organizations filed petitions last spring saying the station had failed to meet its obligation to the state.

Opponents claim that although WWOR is licensed in Secaucus, its coverage is more focused on New York. Until Tuesday, even the logo on its Web site was "My 9 New York," several speakers said.

WWOR, whose license expired on June 1, is owned by Fox Television Stations Inc., which also owns Channel 5.

"Channel 9 has a simple, straightforward directive to have a special focus on issues of relevance to New Jersey," said Paula Desai of Clifton, the associate director of the Media Access Project, which opposes the renewal.

"Based on the evidence provided by Voice for New Jersey [another opponent] and the obvious branding of Channel 9 as a station dedicated to New Yorkers, the commission cannot seriously conclude that



TARIQ ZEHAWI / THE RECORD

▲ Critics and supporters of WWOR-TV packed a public forum organized under pressure from Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg on the station's bid for a license renewal at Rutgers' Newark campus on Wednesday.

A quarter-century of battle

1980: FCC revokes RKO's license for WOR-TV, Channel 9, because of alleged misconduct by parent company.

1982: FCC renews license after station agrees to move to New Jersey.

1983: Station licensed in New Jersey.

1986: Operations move to new \$25 million headquarters in Secaucus.

Channel 9 broadcasts in the interest of New Jersey residents," Desai said.

Opponents cite statistics showing Channel 9 devoted fewer than 170 news stories a year to New Jersey from 1999 to 2006.

Fox officials counter with what they say is "exemplary service to the residents of northern New Jersey" since they acquired the station in 2001, and more than a dozen community groups supported than position.

"Renew the license," said Curtiss Farrow, owner of Irving Street Rep in Newark, which produces the annual McDonald's Gospelfest with support from WWOR.

A fact sheet issued by the station says its daily 10 p.m. newscast "spends a substantial amount of time covering issues of importance to WWOR-TV's New Jersey viewers, including extensive election coverage," and works with The Record "to enhance local coverage."

The station says it provides timely news updates and bottom-of-screen "crawls" with news of "great [importance] to its northern New Jersey viewers" and includes numerous local politicians and community leaders on its weekly public affairs programming.

The station also broadcasts games of three professional sports teams – the Nets, Giants and Yankees – and regional events of interest to New Jersey view- ers, such as the muscular dystrophy telethon and the Puerto Rican Day parade.

Frank Scandale, The Record's editor, said he could not comment on what the station had done in the past, but said that since last spring, when it began a news-sharing arrangement with the paper, WWOR has shown "a commitment to local news."

This is just the latest dispute in the station's many years of strained relationship with New Jersey, starting 25 years ago. That's when Channel 9 agreed to move to the state from New York to comply with a federal law requiring the FCC to set aside at least one VHF license for every state.

The move came after the FCC stripped what was then known as WOR-TV of its license when an investigation found the station's parent at the time, General Tire and Rubber Co., had engaged in corporate misconduct.

A federal appeals court overturned the decision, but the dispute led to federal legislation pushed through Congress by Bradley guaranteeing a five-year license renewal to any station that agreed to relocate in the state.

Once in the state, Channel 9 vastly increased its New Jersey news reports and opened a State House bureau. But the station gradually cut back, and it closed the bureau and announced plans to leave in 2004.

A month later, under pressure from Lautenberg and six members of the state's congressional delegation, Fox backed off and agreed to keep its news-gathering operations here.

Since 2001, WWOR has invested \$12 million in capital improvements in Secaucus, where it has more than 250 employees.

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1987: MCA purchases license from RKO for \$387 million, changes name to WWOR.

1990: MCA spins off WWOR as separate company, Pinelands Inc.

1991: Bid by group led by Teaneck women seeking broadcast license rejected by FCC.

1992: Chris-Craft Industries buys station for \$310 million.

1999: Station granted 8-year license.

2001: FCC, by 3-2 votes, approves Channel 9 sale to Fox Television Stations Inc.

2004: Fox announces plans to leave state, but reverses decision under congressional pressure.

2007: Several organizations petition FCC to deny license renewal.

Source: Record archives