

REMARKS OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
FCC-WILMINGTON TOWN HALL MEETING ON DTV
WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA
MAY 27, 2008

Chairman Martin, Mayor Saffo, Distinguished Guests. Thank you all for being here today to talk about and plan for one of the most important initiatives the FCC has launched in a long while. I want to thank Chairman Martin, without whose leadership this effort would not be happening. He not only ran with the idea but he did so with full-fledged commitment to find a really good market to run the test and then to devote the resources necessary to make it work as seamlessly as possible. But a huge—and I mean *huge*—share of the thanks goes to Wilmington—its broadcasters, its elected leaders and many others who are stepping up to the plate in a high-stakes enterprise. Broadcasters make a bargain with the citizens who own the airwaves that their stations will serve the public interest. In participating in this test market initiative, your local broadcasters breathe life into that public interest commitment. I thank them for it. I thank the good people of Wilmington more generally. From your point of view, you'll be getting to the digital Promised Land a few months before everyone else, but I realize it will take some doing to get it done right.

Now, there are some who wonder why we're spending so much time on Wilmington when there's a whole big country out there to prepare. There are a couple of answers to that. First, the efforts won't stop in the rest of the country. In fact, I'm looking for them to speed up. There are still a lot of Americans who don't know precisely what they have to do to make this transition work for them and their TVs. Truth be told, no one has all the answers. That's one big reason we're so interested in running a test market—so we can identify any unanticipated problems. And the idea is that we will have the resources here on the ground in Wilmington to fix any such problems as quickly as possible and then be able to prepare for them when the rest of the country makes its transition.

What kinds of things will we learn here? I divide them into four categories - technical, consumer, partnerships and the dreaded unknowns.

First, as hard as it is to believe this late in the process, there are still a lot of technical things we don't know. Engineers can run the numbers until the cows come home, but until you actually get out into the real world, you don't really know how things are going to work. How well do those new digital signals travel? Do they travel the way analog TV signals travel? How many people will need new antennas to receive digital? And if they do, are those outdoor antennas for digital when they only needed rabbit ears for their analog sets?

Second, what about consumers? Which messages reach them and which don't? Are there harder-to-reach groups like the elderly, the disabled or non-English speakers who need special outreach? What kind of outreach? What difficulties do consumers have installing the converter boxes and getting a picture? How many consumers won't do

anything no matter how much you tell them in advance? And how do consumers who lose TV on the switch-over date recover? What are the stations' plans for dealing with any interruptions?

Third, partnerships. By that I simply mean the FCC can't make this happen alone, nor should we expect Wilmington's citizens, officials and broadcasters to make it happen alone. This is uncharted territory, and our nation functions best when we venture into that kind of territory with both our private and public sector resources at-the-ready. Take outreach, for example. There are a lot of folks to prepare for September 8. It will take not only the FCC, NTIA and your broadcasters and local governments to bring this off. It will take your service clubs and membership organizations, your other media and community organizations, your schools (even your churches will be affected), it will take the combined resources of this community. Everyone stands to gain from this; everyone wants to avoid service interruptions; that's why I am confident everyone will work together—but it won't happen on autopilot. It will take real and comprehensive commitment.

Finally, in any effort of this scale, there are unknowns that no one anticipates and you find out about only when you throw that switch. That's the category that really keeps me up at night. That's why this test is so important. And that's why we need other broadcast markets to step up and run tests like this, or at least field tests on more limited parts of the problem, such as robustness of the DTV signal; whether sometimes indoor antennas might have to be replaced by outdoor; and whether there are differences in performance among the various kinds of set-top boxes, to name a few.

The bottom line is that the more real world experience we can get in the next six months, the better off we'll be on February 17, 2009, when the rest of the nation hopefully goes digital.

I know that if anyone can make this happen, it's the good citizens of the Tar Heel state. I've lived in North Carolina; gone to school in North Carolina; worked for a while for a North Carolina company; gotten to know most of your very able Congressional delegation and, more recently, your fine mayor—and I just know that if you all come together, this is going to work. Thank you again for what you are doing.