

October 18, 2022

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The Honorable Jessica Rosenworcel
Chairwoman
Federal Communications Commission
45 L Street NE
Washington, D.C. 20554

Dear Chairwoman Rosenworcel,

We write with serious concern regarding the proposal before the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that would upend its rules governing the operation of FM booster stations through allowing such stations to broadcast differing content (otherwise known as “ZoneCasting”).¹

The FCC authorized FM broadcasters to use translator and booster stations four decades ago in order to allow broadcasters to address gaps or interference within their licensed area of coverage. This tailored rule provided broadcasters an important option to establish additional lower power services in their frequency and coverage area to better serve their listeners. Importantly, however, the FCC prohibited these services from originating different content than the main stations, with very limited exceptions. Under the FCC’s longstanding rules, the purpose of a booster station is to ensure that a listener would not be cut off from their community because they lived behind a hill or within a valley — not to treat those audiences differently.

We are concerned that proposals to allow boosters to originate different content from their main stations would upend the FCC’s broadcast licensing regime, impose additional costs on broadcasters, harm local media, and undermine efforts to support an informed public connected to their community. Currently, broadcasters are provided substantial flexibility in establishing booster stations given that the purpose is to reach their audiences. Were the Commission to remove restrictions on originating different content, even if limited, it would risk creating a media marketplace where boosters become, in effect, new affiliate stations that operate without the need for a separate license.

¹ Petition for Rulemaking of GBS, RM-11854 (Mar. 13, 2020) (Petition).

We are especially concerned with the impact of the proposal on broadcasters considering the significant pressure they would face to adopt ZoneCasting and other similar technologies. Given that stated goal of the proposal is to enable targeted advertising to specific neighborhoods, broadcasters would be encouraged, if not effectively forced, by advertisers to adopt such technologies and stand up new booster stations to segment their audiences. That would impose a substantial cost on small broadcasters, who would be required to spend money on new boosters and licensing fees for proprietary technologies — shifting scarce funds away from newsrooms and community resources. That cost would be easier for large and profitable broadcasters to bear, further imposing disproportionate impacts on smaller stations.

Further, we are concerned about the detrimental impact of further carving up communities in broadcasting through narrowly targeted content and advertising. Radio stations currently provide a uniform resource of public information across their broadcast area — listeners are not excluded from certain information and opportunities because they live in the wrong neighborhood. Geographic targeting of advertisements creates a foreseeable risk that certain neighborhoods or communities will not receive ads for employment, education, and other economic opportunities. We also fear that broadcasters who have invested in building listenership in lower income communities could be punished by such proposals if advertisers shift their spending toward more lucrative audience segments. In effect, ZoneCasting could create a race to the bottom at the expense of local broadcasters and the communities they serve.

Finally, we share the concerns of broadcasters, as raised in comments by the State Broadcasters Associations and National Public Radio, that ZoneCasting could create risks of interference and disruption of service — especially if broadcasters face financial pressure to adopt such systems.²

We urge the Commission to maintain the current rules on booster stations, and refrain from making changes that could harm smaller broadcasters and the communities they serve.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
United States Senate

² Comments of State Broadcasters Associations, MB Docket Nos. 20-401 and 17-105, and RM-11854 (July 12, 2022)
Comments of National Public Radio, Inc., MB Docket Nos. 20-401 and 17-105, and RM-11854 (June 6, 2022)