

Known as "radio of the people, for the people, by the people," community radio is trying to break into U.S. large-market airwaves through legislation that would widen opportunities for more organizations to broadcast on Low Power FM stations.

Bills were introduced June 21 in the U.S. Congress that would open the door for more groups to obtain broadcasting licenses.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., a co-sponsor of the House bill and a lifelong member of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Omaha, says community radio allows communities of people to establish their own place on the airwaves.

"What I've seen is that a lot of minority groups and churches in our minority areas don't really have a voice that they can project, and so I want to make sure that they're empowered," Terry said in a June 25 interview with United Methodist News Service.

Supporters say that, with community radio, also known as LPFM, churches could establish a station to speak to its members and the community living within a mile or two of the transmitter. An immigrant neighborhood could operate a station that speaks in its own language about community needs and issues. Minorities could have a broadcast presence, and local musicians could find a radio venue to air independently produced songs that large commercial stations ignore.

"The Local Community Radio Act of 2007" (House Bill 2802) would allow the Federal Communications Commission to license LPFM stations in the 50 largest radio markets in the United States. Currently, all the top markets are off limits to

new licenses. An identical bill was introduced in the Senate by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Maria Cantwell, D-Wash.

"I really believe that this empowers our communities," said Terry. "Now the low power FM may be a weak signal only going out a couple miles, but it has the potential of making our communities stronger. And this is what it's all about."

In a June 21 news conference to introduce the bill, House co-sponsor Rep. Mike Doyle pointed out the cultural wealth that currently never makes commercial airwaves. "LPFM offers local communities the opportunity to broadcast music and other programming at a cost they can afford," said Doyle, D-Pa. "And it holds the promise to dramatically increase the diversity of programming and political views available over the radio."

Seeking support

The congressmen and other advocates urged faith groups to write and call their congressional representatives in behalf of the legislation.

"People of faith are concerned across the board about poverty and health crises in developing countries, and yet those issues are rarely on the airways. Instead we're hearing celebrity gossip and commercialism," said Cheryl Leanza, who lobbies for media reform on behalf of the United Church of Christ.

Another supporter, Amy Ray of the musical group The Indigo Girls, says issuing low-power FM licenses will benefit urban communities.

"It's perfect for cities and urban areas where one community may live in a certain section of town that needs to be informed and needs to inform each other and this

is one way to do it," said Ray, speaking at the news conference. "This is a very easy way to have special language programming, or announcements about local political organizations that are working, and so I feel very strongly about it."

Fellow Indigo Girl Emily Saliers said she personally has witnessed the country's rich diversity while traveling to perform in cities and towns across the United States. Community radio would reflect that diversity, she said.

The possibility of community FM radio opened up in 2000 when the FCC voted to issue licenses. But commercial broadcasters argued the change could cause "oceans of interference" for full-power stations, and Congress quickly blocked the issuance of other licenses in densely populated areas. A subsequent congressionally mandated study of the issue, known as the MITRE Report, showed such LPFM stations would not cause interference.

Terry is upbeat about the bill's chances and anxious to "educate" other members of Congress about the advantages of a wider radio marketplace of news, ideas and music. "... We also aren't seeing the roadblocks that existed in '99 and 2000 which forced the MITRE Report. So I'm really optimistic about this bill," he said.

Currently, more than 750 low power FM stations are in operation, mostly in less-populated parts of the United States.

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