



Wyoming Legislative Service Office

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wyoming Public Television

Program Evaluation Division

January 2002

Purpose

The Management Audit Committee requested an evaluation of Wyoming Public Television (WPTV), Wyoming's only public television station. As background for larger policy issues, the Committee identified a number of questions about WPTV that affect decision-making. The Committee's interest includes WPTV governance, its conversion to digital, its ability to fulfill the mission, and finally, the extent to which it coordinates infrastructure and services with other entities.

Background

Non-commercial television was born in 1967 with the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act. Nearly sixteen years later, WPTV became operational when Central Wyoming College (CWC) established broadcasting facilities on its campus. While the station's original purpose was to provide distance education services to the local area, WPTV eventually grew into a statewide public television network that reaches most state residents.

In 1991, the Legislature directed the Community College Commission (Commission) to make a separate budget request for public television. In addition to requesting WPTV's budget, the Commission includes WPTV in its strategic plan and monitors its performance. Together with CWC and WPTV, the Commission has set a broad mission for the station.

WPTV broadcasts every day of the year for eighteen hours. The majority of WPTV's broadcast is nationally-produced programming, such as *Sesame Street* and *Antiques Roadshow*. Other programming includes college credit telecourses used by some community colleges, non-credit instructional programming, and locally produced programming focused upon Wyoming people, issues, and interests.

WPTV is funded through state and federal dollars, plus private donations. Historically, the station has directed the \$1 million per biennium appropriated by the state to operational support, not infrastructure. State General Fund appropriations comprise approximately half of WPTV's budget.

In 1996, Congress determined that all broadcast television service must convert from analog to digital, with a final deadline of 2006. While the state has not traditionally invested in WPTV infrastructure, during the 2001 Session, the Legislature appropriated \$1 million to WPTV to begin its conversion. WPTV is requesting additional funding for conversion in the 2002 Budget Session. This request for increased state investment has brought WPTV into the spotlight.

Results in Brief

WPTV is a statewide program governed by the CWC Board of Trustees, a local, independent community college board. A state-level entity, the Commission, has limited responsibilities for WPTV that do not include making policy for the station. While

this governance structure has not kept WPTV from developing a statewide network, as additional state monies are invested in WPTV for its digital conversion, the Legislature may wish to consider alternative governance structures.

Although the Legislature funds WPTV's operations, it cannot otherwise guide the station's direction. Any change in governance requires careful study. If the Legislature desires an enhanced state role with regard to WPTV guidance or governance, we identify several options for consideration. On the other hand, if the Legislature wishes to leave the current governance structure in place, we suggest steps that would clarify governance relationships with WPTV.

On its own initiative, WPTV has stretched infrastructure to make its broadcast accessible to an estimated 86 percent of state residents. Taking tacit legislative support from continuing minimal appropriations, as well as perceived demand from the public, WPTV has expanded its network through formal and informal agreements with private entities. The station's expansion has resulted in a statewide network, but has also created a system with fragile reliability.

With the impending digital conversion, WPTV is at a crossroads with respect to its future. Digital conversion is necessary to maintain a statewide network.

WPTV has estimated digital conversion will cost \$3.3 million dollars, but we found that this estimate will convert only a portion of its statewide network. Additionally, that amount will not enable WPTV to meet federal requirements beyond the initial 2003 deadline. Without additional funding, WPTV's network, built over the last 20 years, could become obsolete. The extent of additional funding needed is not known; WPTV needs to provide the Legislature cost estimates for the digital conversion of its entire network.

To this point, WPTV has scrounged and traded to expand its service area on its own. This puts WPTV in the position of having to seek greater commitment from the Legislature for a program it has not officially authorized. We suggest WPTV take steps to gain this commitment by demonstrating to the Legislature its value to the state.

We found that the state-owned or operated wireless systems could potentially share infrastructure. WPTV, as well as WYDOT and Wyoming Public Radio (WPR) operate these systems. However, minimal infrastructure sharing occurs, and only between WPTV and WPR. Since the three are independently governed, each has had the autonomy to develop the infrastructure that best met individual needs. No state agency has the authority to require these three independent systems to coordinate. Doing so will require high-level leadership that is beyond the capacity of WPTV.

Over the years, WPTV has produced or acquired programming or projects that support other state-funded efforts. However, WPTV has not consistently coordinated its actions with state entities holding primary responsibilities in those areas. With limited resources and production capability, WPTV could benefit from the assistance that coordinated efforts entail. The new station general manager indicates that WPTV will increase its coordination efforts. This will be even more critical if the station realizes the full potential of digital conversion.

Agency Comments

WPTV, the Commission and CWC agree with the report's proposed governance options of developing a plan that allows for wider participation in WPTV governance and of updating the Memorandum of Understanding that sets out how WPTV is governed. They are neutral about the placement of legislative intent for WPTV in statute as long as it does not interfere with editorial and programming decisions.