

Ryan Williams, MP
Parliament of Canada,
Ottawa, Ontario,
Canada
K1A 0A6

January 5, 2023

Dear MP Ryan Williams,

99.3 County FM is a Community Radio station located in the Hastings-Prince Edward riding at 38 Cold Storage Rd., Picton Ontario, K0K 2T0. We are a volunteer-driven not-for-profit organization that provides critical local news, information and entertainment to your riding. We have been on the air since October 2014.

We serve as a broadcast service for 150+ nonprofit and volunteer organizations throughout the County that use our services to inform/engage their diverse audiences. Despite the pandemic, over the past year, this 108 volunteer team (and 4 FT staff) racked up 21,266 volunteer hours. The station maintained its six locally produced daily newscasts (weekdays) but the team had to train the 14 volunteer newscasters, many of whom are seniors, to produce content from home and assist with equipment. As well, many of the on-air music and daily talk show hosts were converted from working in the studio to home.

The impact of COVID-19 was very hard on our sector, as many businesses were closed or impacted financially and unable to commit to ad campaigns. Many of our donors were laid off or unable to commit to financial contributions as well over the past fifteen months, which has led us to working with a skeleton staff, and a thin budget. About a third of our advertising is also associated with events/event advertising/and support of the local AAA hockey team, 95% of that revenue was removed when the pandemic started and it took a couple of years to recover.

Over the last year we produced 6700+ Public Service Announcements to raise awareness and publicity for community organizations to promote their cancellations, online events, services and fundraising programs. Other unique community support during the pandemic included broadcasting the Grade 8 and High School graduation ceremonies and working with 18 communities of faith to create a non-denominational service on Christmas Eve and Day. Our daily newsmagazine, The Grapevine, has included interviews that span a variety of topics: from politics, COVID-19 and health and safety, to business, science, literature, culinary, film and the arts.

In the past few years we also developed an Emergency Preparedness Plan in consultation with the OPP, Fire Dept, National Campus & Community Radio Assoc, and researched best practices; the new manual was put in place and directions given to the news and on-air hosts. We also broadcast 8,098 drive safety messages at no charge during the year, including don't drive impaired/don't text drive, etc.

In order to continue operations and provide these and many more services, we are asking that you support two critical programs that are essential to our ability to continue to serve this community and fight against disinformation.

1) Increase the Local Journalism Initiative to \$20 million a year and make it permanent.

The CRFC LJI program defines our area as underserved and one of “news poverty”. Although 41 stations across the country have journalists, until the CRFC Local Journalism Program offered us support, we had only a part-time News Director. Our News Director ensures up-to-date information on arts and entertainment happenings, traffic, health and safety warnings, community news, and park reports to the county’s 25,000 residents and over 650,000 seasonal tourists, workers, and residents. Our news director provided individual instruction on format, voice, and recording of daily news to our team of volunteer newscasters who prepare 15 original newscasts to be broadcast 6 different times every weekday.

For 2022, the LJI student/roving reporter, along with the increased hours of our current part-time News Director, resulted in improvements in how we both gather and report on issues that are important to our community. We were able to add hours to the News Director's role. Our part-time student/roving reporter has enabled us to have a journalist report on our municipal government's biweekly meetings for full Council, and weekly Committee meetings on issues such as housing, economic development, agriculture and libraries. Key events and happenings at other institutions: primary schools, one high school, six library branches, and Quinte Healthcare (Picton campus), Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board, Court cases (e.g. PEC (municipality) v Picton Terminals), as well as local provincial ministries and matters have also been better covered this past year.

The LJI program has resulted in our ability to make the news broadcasts/reporting more robust through more on-air and in-person interviews with political and municipal leaders. Our News Director has also been able to pursue stories with provincial and federal politicians to bring more local flavour to our newscasts/stories. The LJI student worked closely with the News Director over the past year to develop story ideas, and content that was also used on our daily newsmagazine, The Grapevine.

The pandemic had a major impact on tourism which impacted traffic, including those roads leading to the popular Sandbanks Provincial Park. In 2021 the station co-developed with the municipality a 2021 Parks Report which enabled the station to air Park status/closure updates up to eight times/day during the busy tourist months of May-October. This initiative was repeated in 2022, and we anticipate a need for a 2023 Parks Report.

HPE public health has benefited and will continue to benefit if the LJI program is continued. COVID-19 and its variants continued to be an issue in 2022 and may well remain an area of concern in 2023. We will also continue to provide ongoing updates/progress reports on the construction of our new hospital. Without an extension, our community will lose this information.

We would greatly appreciate the opportunity to increase our Community Reporter’s hours from 8 hours a week to 12 hours. Based on our experience to date we know that these hours could

be effectively used. At this time, we have promoted our Community Reporter's role in the community however we could do this more assertively on-air, on-line, and through one-on-one conversations and marketing. The purpose would be to ensure we are top of mind with the community when it comes to both being a source for new breaking local stories and as a resource to those with a news story to convey on-air.

2) Establish a 25 million dollar annual Community Broadcasting Fund to be distributed among all community radio stations.

Having additional core and stable funding would allow us to spend more time on generating local programming as opposed to the quantity of time required for ongoing grant applications and solicitation of donations. It would also soften the peaks and valleys in ad revenue during this uncertain time.

Campus and community radio stations are a pillar of broadcasting in Canada with unique access to underserved communities both urban and rural. Throughout the pandemic, our members delivered accurate public health information to Canadians in at least 65 different languages. The sector is made up of thousands of people committed to ensuring broadcasts meet rigorous standards. As many as nine and a half million Canadians in over 150 communities listen regularly at least once per month to community radio and for many, it is their only source of live, local information.

We thank you for your interest in supporting local media and welcome any questions or comments. We'd also certainly be happy to have you come in for a visit and let you see the magic of our radio station 99.3 County FM in person.

Sincerely,

Craig Mills

Craig Mills, General Manager
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