



A Chance for Public Input

These days, the broadcasting planning process is the only policy area where there is significant opportunity for public input and the only remaining major meeting point between the regulator and the community.

This process, however, only relates to planning of services in spectrum. There is no overall planning process for all communication and information services or broadcasting services using other technology.

It remains to be seen how many individual viewers and listeners, as opposed to interested organisations and companies, will take advantage of this opportunity to contribute their views. The history of public contributions to the processes of the former regulator, the ABT, does not inspire confidence that multitudes will rush to grasp the chance to exercise their democratic rights.

Earlier this year, the ABA issued a draft planning priorities document and held public consultations around the country. Each of its planning seminars in the capital cities was attended by 50-100 people. The Authority has received around 850 submissions since the end of 1992. As a result of this process, the ABA has now announced its planning priorities for broadcasting services for the next three years in a document, *Planning Priorities 1993*.

ABA spokesman Ian Laird said that there had been a 'tremendous response' about the extension of existing services. Perhaps the most striking thing to emerge was the demand for ABC services, particularly 2JJJ, and for SBS in areas still not receiving SBS services.

Laird said that a majority of the submissions were substantial, and the rest comprised 'form letters' and other letters from individual viewers and listeners. More submissions tended to come from the least well serviced areas, and this is reflected in the final priorities, which place remote and under-served regions at the top of the list.

It is worth noting that in lower priority areas like Adelaide, Hobart/Southern Tasmania, Gippsland, Perth and Western Victoria, there was little public demand for new services (a finding which should give pause to the proponents of pay TV!). In these areas, the concerns were about reception problems with broadcasting services rather than the number and type of services available.

Scrutiny of the ABA's summary of 'demand for services' in each area suggests little in the way of imaginative ideas about the potential for new services. Ideas for narrowcasting services were not part of the brief for this process, which was essentially about laying out future patterns for existing AM and FM radio and for terrestrial television. But this left plenty of scope for innovative contributions about uses for existing outlets.

There was considerable interest from existing commercial radio licensees in solus markets for additional licences. There was strong demand for community licences. But where were the education interests, for example, who have for so long demanded radio and television outlets for their material?

Perhaps they will emerge in the second phase of the process, when teams of ABA staff visit various parts of the country to hear community views and hold public meetings. Radio and TV announcements as well as newspaper advertisements will publicise these visits, and Ian Laird told *CU* that the ABA hoped to produce radio ads in non-English languages for use on community stations.

Planning Priorities 1993 has been distributed to all those who participated in the first phase of the process and made submissions. Copies of submissions are available on microfiche. Additional copies are available on request to (02) 334 7883, and there are also plans for an 008 number to allow wide participation and comment.

The Priorities

Planning Priorities 1993 comprises 120 pages plus attachments (mostly maps). It outlines the planning process and the statutory framework for the process, and describes how priorities were determined for preparing both Frequency Allotment Plans (FAPs) and Licence Area Plans (LAPs).

The ABA concludes that the initial FAPs should treat Australia as a single area, for a number of reasons, such as that the number of channels in any area cannot be determined in isolation from the number in other areas. For example, use of an AM channel in Melbourne would preclude use of the same channel in Adelaide because of possible interference. Similar considerations apply for FM Radio and the television spectrum.

The bulk of the report is taken up with priority determinations for LAPs, and describes each of these areas: their demographic and social characteristics; their existing services; the interest in new or changed licences; the demand for services; and technical issues.

In television, the Authority decided to allocate lowest priority to television zones comprising aggregated or metropolitan television markets which already have access to five or six channels. Television zones with only one commercial service are to be planned simultaneously and placed in the highest priority group. These zones also tend to equate with radio zones which have the greatest need for additional services, and planning for these will be co-ordinated.

The highest priorities were allocated to remote Australia, central and south-west Western Australia, Darwin and the Top End. An analysis of submissions received in this area indicated significant interest in the development of community and commercial radio services from entrepreneurs and community organisations, with a high level of support from local Councils and other organisations. □