



Public broadcasting stations are feeling funding pinch

Brad Cooper February 11, 2013

Little by little, Kansas public broadcasters feel the pinch of state budget cuts.

At High Plains Public Radio in Garden City, the air sometimes goes dead or programs play twice on consecutive days.

Broadcasts at Radio Kansas in Hutchinson shut down from midnight to 6 a.m. so the station can cut its electric bill.

In Kansas and across the country, public broadcasters find statehouses reluctant to help with the bills for two reasons: There's simply less money to spare, and Republican-dominated legislatures see the radio and TV stations as too liberal.

"The real question is: Is it a dinosaur that's dying?" asked state Rep. Pete DeGraaf, a Mulvane Republican and chairman of the General Government Budget Committee.

Managers at public stations face even more gaps in their budgets if the Kansas Legislature agrees with Republican Gov. Sam Brownback's plans to cut funding even more.

"We would take a pretty good hit. All the stations would," said Deb Oyler, the executive director for High Plains, which serves a large swath of western Kansas.

In a world with hundreds of cable TV stations, satellite radio and the Internet, public broadcasting faces increasingly tough battles to win government money.

Across the country, cash-strapped states have cut their support for public broadcasting. Brownback tried to eliminate it outright during his first year in office, but legislators went along only with lesser cuts.

This year, the governor wants to cut state support for public TV and radio stations by 40 percent, or roughly \$400,000.

For some rural Kansas stations such as Smoky Hills Public Broadcasting in Bunker Hill or High Plains Public Radio, the state's contribution can make up between 11 percent and 16 percent of their budgets. For stations such as KCPT in Kansas City, state funding makes up about 2 percent of the overall budget.

The Brownback administration has urged public broadcasters to look elsewhere for money, something station executives say they are doing.

Station managers say they are trimming staff, asking employees to take on multiple duties and stepping up fundraising.

Cuts proposed for Kansas mirror a national trend of states getting out of public broadcasting, whether because the outlets are viewed as too liberal, anachronistic in a world overflowing with media or not a core government service.

Amid the billions of dollars that government spends, public broadcasting is easy picking for lawmakers who want to limit government expenses.

Many conservatives see public radio as outside traditional government responsibilities that should be limited to things such as schools, social services, public safety and roads.

But they also see something more sinister: state-run media.

“The fundamental problem is we need to separate news and state,” said David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank.

“It is inappropriate for the government to be involved in news and ideas,” Boaz said. “The First Amendment is designed to protect the free flow of information and the free flow of ideas, but not to have the government producing the ideas.”

Local public broadcasters say they remain relevant to modern life. They say they deliver local public affairs shows or documentaries that cannot be seen anywhere else.

“Those commercial stations that are owned by absentee owners are not doing local history, local arts or any of those things,” said Eugene Williams, general manager at KTWU in Topeka.

About half the states have cut money to public broadcasting in recent years. Those cuts neared \$37 million — to \$177 million from \$214 million — from fiscal 2011 to fiscal 2013, according to data compiled by the National Educational Telecommunications Association.

At least four states — New Jersey, Virginia, New Hampshire and Florida — completely ditched funding for public broadcasting.

Missouri is going in a different direction. Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon has recommended putting \$800,000 into public broadcasting for fiscal year 2014 from the state’s tax on non-resident athletes and entertainers. That’s up from the current \$100,000.

KCPT in Kansas City receives about \$22,000 a year from Missouri, but that could increase to about \$225,000 under Nixon’s proposal. KCPT has a budget of \$7.2 million.

KCUR receives about \$3,400 for arts reporting from the Missouri Arts Council and \$50,000 more from the University of Missouri-Kansas City toward its \$4.2 million budget.

Public radio advocates say it’s hard to characterize the debate over simply as conservative vs. liberal or Democrat vs. Republican.

“It’s a complicated story,” said Josh Stearns, public media campaign director for Free Press, a nonprofit group that examines how the media influence public policy. “In the same states where we’ve had Republican governors going after this funding, we’ve seen Republican lawmakers standing up vehemently to protect it.”

In places, for instance, such as Kansas.

The state has been trimming public broadcasting since 2009. After taking office in 2011, Brownback wanted to eliminate or further cut grants to public stations. Yet the Republican-controlled Legislature resisted and stopped the governor from cutting as deeply as he wanted.

One Republican who supported public broadcasting was Sen. Carolyn McGinn of Sedgwick, who until this year was chairwoman of the Ways and Means Committee.

She questioned how the state could cut funding for an amenity that benefits the very rural areas where the governor is trying build population.

“The communities that are hurt the most are rural areas,” McGinn said. “If you don’t have cable TV, you can’t get any other kind of information or channels you might want to watch.”

One thing going for public broadcasting this year is its funding source. The governor wants to pay for it from gambling money instead of general tax dollars, which satisfies conservatives who don’t believe in sending tax dollars to public broadcasters.

Public broadcasting will get about \$1 million from the state this year, down from about \$1.5 million the year before.

NETA president Skip Hinton said there may have been occasions when politics drove cuts in public broadcasting. But most of the cuts, he said, reflected tough state finances.

Kansas lawmakers eye every spending decision in the context of income tax cuts projected to cause revenues to plummet more than \$700 million in the next fiscal year.

Nevertheless, some Kansas public broadcasters still hear complaints inside and outside the Capitol about their perceived liberal inclinations.

“If that’s true, we need to look at what we’re doing and make sure we’re not leaning one way or the other and presenting it as close to the middle as we can,” said Mark McCain, general manager at KMUW in Wichita.

State Rep. Virgil Peck, a Tyro Republican, is among those Kansas lawmakers who oppose using general tax dollars for public broadcasting.

“They do have a political bent just like MSNBC, but that’s not the reason I oppose it,” Peck said. “Should we give money to Sean Hannity, Mark Levin, Rush Limbaugh and all these others who are right-wing groups? No. If they can survive on their own, God bless them.”

But there are other conservatives who are more supportive of public broadcasting.

“I think it’s particularly important in rural communities that don’t have the same level of access to educational and cultural presentations in any format,” said state Rep. John Rubin, a Shawnee Republican. “I would rather look elsewhere to realize savings in the budget.”