

Congressman Bill Pascrell, Jr. Statement for the Record

Communications and Technology Subcommittee on the Committee on Energy and Commerce
“Strengthening Our Communications Networks to Meet the Needs of Consumers”

October 6, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member Latta, and members of the Communications and Technology Subcommittee. I especially want to thank Chairman Frank Pallone, for his tireless commitment to New Jersey and leadership on the full committee.

Ben Franklin once called New Jersey “a barrel tapped at both ends.” He was describing our state’s uniquely precarious station between behemoths New York and Philadelphia. Over 200 years later, that position still applies, and is especially true in our media coverage.

Perhaps no other state’s residents suffer from a lack of local news coverage more than New Jerseyans. That is why I greatly appreciate that today’s hearing includes my legislation (H.R.4208). This essential bill would hold WWOR-TV accountable for failing to provide local New Jersey coverage, in likely violation of its Federal Communications Commission (FCC) license.

A broadcast license is public property and a public trust. For decades, WWOR has broken that trust by refusing to cover the Garden State with the attention it desperately needs. So many challenges to American democracy today can be traced to the damaging decline of local news. Our state and country deserve better.

In accordance with a 1982 federal law, the FCC stipulated that any license holder for WWOR-TV “devote itself to meeting the special needs of its new community (and the needs of the Northern New Jersey area in general).” But the Fox-owned station shut down its entire Secaucus-based news operation in 2013. WWOR currently offers zero local news programming and only one half-hour a week of public affairs. By comparison, broadcast stations in the overlapping New York City and Philadelphia media markets broadcast an average of 56 hours of weekly news and public affairs.

Late last year, the FCC wisely denied Fox’s request for a permanent waiver to own WWOR and several newspapers that would have, for all intents and purposes, allowed WWOR to ignore its legal duties to New Jersey with impunity.

Regrettably, the FCC renewed WWOR’s license in 2018 for another decade over the opposition of many New Jerseyans. The FCC also refuses to impose lesser sanctions on WWOR than revoking its license, with the agency claiming it lacks the evidence necessary to impose penalties on WWOR for failing to comply with its New Jersey news requirements.

New Jersey has waited long enough for change. At long last, my legislation will give the FCC sharp tools to force WWOR and other derelict stations to fulfill their public responsibilities. Specifically, our measure would require licensee holders under this section to:

- Broadcast at least 14 hours of localized programming during primetime hours,
- File with the FCC a quarterly disclosure of all local programming, including a separate list of particularized local content,
- Consult with local leaders in the market served by the station, and;

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- Orders the Government Accountability Office to issue a report that examines the process by which the FCC renews broadcast television licenses, and specifically to determine if that process adequately holds Section 331 broadcast television stations accountable to their statutory or license obligations.

For years, my friend, the late Senator Frank Lautenberg, pursued this issue on behalf of news-starved New Jerseyans. I am proud to join arms with Senators Bob Menendez and Cory Booker to keep up his fight.

Thank you and the staff of the Subcommittee for your time and attention on the matter. I look forward to working together to move our bill forward to hold WWOR-TV accountable. I yield back.