
Committee Meeting

of

SENATE LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

“The committee will receive testimony from invited guests concerning the future of public broadcasting in New Jersey”

LOCATION: Committee Room 4
State House
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: November 17, 2025
1:00 p.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Andrew Zwicker, Chair
Senator M. Teresa Ruiz, Vice Chair
Senator John J. Burzichelli
Senator Joseph Pennacchio
Senator Robert W. Singer

ALSO PRESENT:

Madelynn K. Correnti, Esq.
Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aide

Rosa Farias
Senate Majority
Committee Aide

John Gorman
Senate Republican
Committee Aide



Hearing Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
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Chair

M. Teresa Ruiz
Vice-Chair

John J. Burzichelli
Joseph Pennacchio
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SENATE LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

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COMMITTEE NOTICE

TO: MEMBERS OF THE SENATE LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE
FROM: SENATOR ANDREW ZWICKER, CHAIRMAN
SUBJECT: COMMITTEE MEETING – NOVEMBER 17, 2025

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The Senate Legislative Oversight Committee will meet on Monday, November 17, 2025 at 1:00 PM in Committee Room 4, 1st Floor, State House Annex, Trenton, New Jersey.

The committee will receive testimony from invited guests concerning the future of public broadcasting in New Jersey.

Issued 11/7/25

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SENATOR ANDREW ZWICKER (Chair): Good afternoon, and welcome to the Senate Oversight Committee. Can we have roll call?

MS. CORRENTI: Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Here.

MS. CORRENTI: Senator Pennacchio.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: Here.

MS. CORRENTI: Senator Burzichelli.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Here.

MS. CORRENTI: Vice Chair Ruiz. (no response)

Chairman Zwicker.

MS. CORRENTI: Perfect.

SENATOR ZWICKER: I want to thank everyone for being here today as this Committee discusses the future of public broadcasting here in New Jersey.

Historically, many of you know that it was a year after President Lyndon Johnson created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that this Legislature put together its own public broadcasting system and network; that was in 1968. In 2011, there were significant changes under then-Governor Christie. And, now, in 2025, we are here in an ever-changing media environment with an enormous amount of pressure to work through what the future of public broadcasting is here -- is going to be in New Jersey.

We have a variety of folks with a tremendous amount of expertise, both working behind the scenes and for it-- I don't know what that was. And, what I'd like to do as we talk about public broadcasting is bring up, to start, somebody who spent a significant number of years working

specifically on something that I think we all know best, which is *Sesame Street*; and, I'm going to ask Assemblywoman Dunn to come up.

A S S E M B L Y W O M A N A U R A K. D U N N: Thank you.

Next chair here?

SENATOR ZWICKER: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: All right.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Front row.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: Front row.

Thank you, thank you. OK.

Red means go. See, that would've never happened on *Sesame Street*.

SENATOR ZWICKER: In the Senate we make things very difficult.

(laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: But, I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, Vice Chair Teresa Ruiz, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak today for holding this important hearing on the future of public broadcasting in New Jersey. Yes, for nearly a decade I represented public television. I was the Director of Federal Policy for the Association -- Association of America's Public Television Stations. I like to say I got to the State House through *Sesame Street*. I was Government Affairs VP and a very special part of the work was also representing Mr. Fred Rogers with Family Communications, the production company, for all of his work which then became professional development for the nation's caregivers. For many children, as we know, public broadcasting -- and, I will say, also for America's newcomers -- public television is their very first classroom. The non-

commercial free and universal access to research-backed content goes far beyond the screen. And, just a few examples of public media's partnerships include the Department of Defense, where we worked with military families to deal with separation and loss; and FEMA to deal with disaster recovery and preparedness. Public Broadcasting takes on difficult issues, defining life issues, such as death, divorce, disability, and all the while teaching tolerance, inclusivity, and resilience. These are subjects you will not find the Cartoon Network feeling morally or socially obliged to tackle, but public broadcasting does, fostering learning and pro-social development for our next generation. In these roles, I've had the privilege of seeing firsthand the real difference public media makes in the lives of children, especially those in underserved communities. I have met parents working night shifts or multiple jobs who told me that *Sesame Street* was more than a show; it was a trusted partner in their child's early development, and a critical educational lifeline.

For families who can't afford private preschool or expensive streaming service, public television is the only consistent source of educational content in the home. It teaches letters and numbers, yes, but also kindness and how to navigate the world. New Jersey PBS continues that mission here in our state. It provides free, high-quality programming that helps children learn and connect communities. It tells our stories, covers our local news, and reflects who we are as a state. And, it does all of this without asking families to pay a subscription fee. Losing New Jersey PBS would mean losing one of the few places where every child, no matter their background, has access to the tools they need to succeed. It would mean fewer trusted sources of local news, fewer educational resources, and fewer opportunities

for connection in a time when, I think, many of us will agree, we need it the most.

Without PBS, New Jersey loses coverage of our towns, schools, and elections; a watchdog in the State House; local reporting during crises; and storytelling that reflects who we are as a state. New Jersey is sandwiched between two major media markets in New York City and Philadelphia. A distinct New Jersey station ensures coverage of news that matters most to New Jersey residents, and a watchful eye right here, right now.

I'll close with this thought from someone I had the honor of representing before Congress and the White House; and, I promise I won't make us all come out and sing. In his documentary, in *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, Fred Rogers had this to say: Television has the chance of building a real neighborhood out of an entire country. And, that is what local public broadcasting does; that is why I'm here today *again* in this fight to keep that neighborhood strong, informed, and truly local. So, thank you again to the Committee for your time and your commitment to this issue. I look forward to working with all of you together to protect this essential service for New Jersey. Thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

(applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: I'm happy to stay put if any questions.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Any questions?

Senator.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: Brooklyn girl -- Assemblywoman.

You had mentioned watchdog, and one of the concerns that we have on my side of the aisle is that when you give money, you are shackled to the people that give you that money. There's a whole host of reports partisan, non-partisan that could actually prove that that's true. In a state like New Jersey that has a history of being corrupt, how do we get away from that?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: Now, I'm going to say you and I are on the same side of the aisle.

And, I missed the part about the corrupt, but I-- What was your last piece about?

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: If you're taking money, you're shackled to the people who are giving you the money.

New Jersey has a history of corruption, and we depend on the press--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: Right.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: --especially the taxpayer funded press in order to put a spotlight on that, that way, less of that happens, and if it happens to expose it, to be transparent.

How do we get away from that?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: We, again, we're looking at the very mission, and I think what you bring up is a legitimate concern, which, I think, we'll be discussing in this Committee as well, is how making sure that the content is objective and fair and balanced.

And, that's, again, that's where our role here and being part of it's -- it's public, it's all of our television, all of our programming. So, you could say that for any organization, right? A non-profit that receives a grant

from the Federal government to make sure that it is complying with the said mission and purpose of that programming and service to bring opportunity, as I mentioned, particularly in the area of children's television, for all children regardless of background.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: (Indiscernible) Chairman, because of taxpayer funding, we have to have the vigilance attached to that to make sure that, quite frankly, they're doing their jobs.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: And, reminder, this is a public-private partnership, that so many of these programs are underwritten and doing their own fundraising, and again, it remains non-commercial which I think is what -- as I mentioned in my testimony -- there's no other platform like that.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Senator.

Yes, the majority of what public broadcasting is are children's programming, or other things besides news. Of course we want to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars, but public television has a many, many decades-long history of reaching populations that normally don't receive television public service announcements with programming that is, as the Assemblywoman talked about, incredibly unique and important. But, I hear you when it comes to ensuring that we are good stewards of the taxpayer dollar.

Senator, did you want to make a comment or a question?

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Just brief, thank you, Chairman.

Assemblywoman, very well spoken. You set a good tone for what we're working towards, which is trying to figure out what this is going to look

like next. For those of us who were here 15 years ago when it was taken apart -- by one single vote in the Senate, by the way -- it changed overnight. And, we're going to discuss with those who are going to come after you, some of the particulars of what didn't happen. Like, for example, the \$332 million which was supposed to find its way into a fund set aside for public broadcasting, had to be used elsewhere. We were in great financial strain here at the state; we had a couple budgets that were at a surplus of \$300 million. If you remember, we had no money. They were very difficult times. So, there were a lot of causalities through those times. Public broadcasting at the New Jersey level, NJTV was one of those casualties. Now, we have an opportunity to take the next step. We're going to need help -- yourself on the Assembly side, we in the Senate -- of what this should look like, because this administration's going to go out with an RFP. Eventually that's going to come back to the Legislature, so this education curve we're on now to try and get a sense of what this should be is an honest open question. Because, all of broadcasting has changed. NBC, CBS, all of them, they just all changed dramatically. But, there is no question that we need this vehicle of communications from the State House out. This government needs to work in the light of day, not in the quiet of no one paying attention. So, your comment set a nice tone for us, and we're fact finding at the moment, collectively, yourself as well. Then, we have to put our heads together. Gotta figure out what's best for everybody.

Thank you, Chairman.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Senator.

SENATOR RUIZ: Chairman, and thank you, Senator, for sharing that; this is just in the event that I won't be here for the length of the time.

We have to remember where we are geographically, because the media buys, and where we sit oftentimes most of the news that is being produced by the State of New Jersey is not getting covered. Something big enough, Philadelphia will pick it up, and something big enough up in the north, then the New York media anchors will pick it up. And, I will tell you this, I don't know about any one of you, but whenever you are on any one of these channels, people are watching because they are sending you emails, they're grateful for the information. We have families, constituencies, and residencies watching even if it's just a very short programming, or it's very limited as to what it was 18 years ago when I first got elected to office. It is the only source of New Jersey TV that we have, whatever iteration it gets reborn in, but it's something that I don't think we should lose in any capacity.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Thank you, Assemblywoman, appreciate that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DUNN: Thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Senator, you mentioned some of the assets, so we're going to talk about some of that now.

I'd like to call up a panel that includes Rick Williams, Executive Director for New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority; Scott Kobler, who is with McCarter and English; and, Tom Bracken, President CEO of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

Do we have Rick Williams here? (no response)

OK. Mr. Kobler, why don't you start us off.

SCOTT A. KOBLER, Esq.: Thank you, Senator for the opportunity and for the invitation.

I know I've been told that I'm limited to 3-4 hours-- I mean, 3-4 minutes-- (laughter). And, so, I want to make myself as useful to the Senators as I can possibly can be. I just want to tell you very briefly about myself so you get a sense of perspective of the witness. I've been at McCarter and English for 43 years. My specialty has been counseling and merging, and taking apart and financing the largest nonprofits in the state, whether they're universities or health systems. I think I sat in this room 33 years ago in July 1992 as a 36-year-old and testified before Senator Littell about the future of public broadcasting in New Jersey, having been recently appointed a Commissioner of the Public Broadcasting Authority by Governor Florio. And, the Legislature had funded the PBA for six months; it was going to go dark in December of that year. And, sitting next to me was not Tom Bracken, but was the General Manager of WNET in New York which wanted to take the public media function away from New Jersey. And, back then -- I don't take full credit for it -- but I argued rather vigorously to continue to have us a service that functioned, and here we are 33 years later still having that conversation. For the last 33 years for the majority of that period, I have been the Chairman of NJN, NJTV, and NJPBS, and I recently publicly stepped down -- rather publicly stepped down -- as the Chairman of NJPBS because, more than anything, I am a New Jerseyan, and I agree with the comments that were made by the Senators about the importance of coverage of this state, the keg tapped at both ends.

We have a generational opportunity available to us right now. And, what I'd like to do is rather than talk about the things that

Assemblywoman Dunn did, or maybe my colleague Tom Bracken might about the importance of continuing to cover, is how we can make this best to serve the citizens of New Jersey; do it efficiently; and, as Senator Pennacchio mentioned, preserve -- as I tried very strongly to do for 30x years -- the editorial independence of the reporters. We have an architecture of a plan going forward. We have the component parts already in the state to do this right and to serve the state as best as we possibly can. And, I'd like to talk a bit about that.

I would like to create or continue much in the same way as the organization that I chair, the Public Media New Jersey, as a New Jersey 15A, a New Jersey non-profit, which our Attorney General will tell you is functionally public trust, the contractual responsibility with the State. The licensure would stay there. What I'm talking to you about will be faithful to the Transfer Act which was passed 15 years ago, and consistent with the program services agreement, along the lines of what WNET did. And, that would be the hub. The hub would be a group of persons who would be diverse geographically; ethnically; racially; in any matter, to be representative of the state, to be actually the corporate being where editorial independence would reside. The reporters would reside at that level. And, then we would draw upon the greatness of New Jersey. We would draw upon the journalism schools, and the greatness that I'm sure you will hear about at Montclair State, and that would be done by contractual relationship. And, I'm going to steal from my day job: Just like a health system might enter into an (indiscernible) affiliation agreement with someone who might have some kind of service line expertise. And, so, there would be a contract, and that contract would say, Montclair State, and supply the students, and supply the

master control; Kean, you do this; Rowan, you do this. We provide sports; we provide news; we provide more about New Jersey than is being reported right now.

Secondly, an important column to me is arts. I personally -- having served 10 years on the Board of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and 20 on the Board of the Symphony -- would look to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, which is interested. And, I would say contractually to them, "You work with the other arts organizations in this state, and use the channels that are available through the State license to amplify what you put on the stage." So, therefore children in Newark who are performing at the new Cooperman Center can wind up having their programs be featured.

Number 3, you will hear from Chris Daggett about the importance of integrating with hyper-local journalism, and making sure that local reporters wind up getting their stories up on a statewide level and vice versa. Senator, I know I've exceeded my time. So, I-- What I do want to tell you is that even outside of this room, there is a very strong feeling about the hub and spoke, drawing upon the best features and best characteristics of the state, and there are people ready to execute upon. The Transfer Act provides that any agreement comes back to both Houses of the Legislature. So, you get a look at it. It also provides that the Treasurer can conduct and receive proposals in any way he or she may feel about them. So, I just volunteer myself to do it, once again, because of my interest and love for the importance of telling the truth, and reporting on the state that I love.

So, Mr. Bracken. Thank you, by the way, for that opportunity, and the indulgence.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

And, we'll do questions after we hear from Mr. Bracken.

T H O M A S A. B R A C K E N: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee; I'm Tom Bracken. I'm the President and CEO of the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce.

I've been a Board Member of every New Jersey public broadcasting entity since its inception in 1992. I recently resigned, as Scott did, from the NJPBS board for the very same reasons that Scott did. It was not-- It was becoming less and less Jersey-centric, and I'm a builder of New Jersey, not a destroyer of New Jersey. My organization, the New Jersey State Chamber of Commerce, continues to try to enhance and build the reputation of our state to the level we deserve. In an already media-starved state, we cannot afford the existing media to diminish any further, as is the case with the recent announcements regarding NJPBS. Our goal needs to be the expansion of all media outlets to provide broad-based, New Jersey-centric information to our citizenship. New Jersey has an exciting story to tell. A new administration that will bring positive changes that need to be communicated, and most importantly, an obligation to give our citizens timely information to be able to manage their lives and businesses. Recreating a modern and updated version of the original public broadcasting entity, NJN, one that was -- is managed, controlled, and managed by New Jersey organizations, is one very realistic way to help fill this void right now. I cannot think of one negative associated with this proposal.

Information is the lifeblood of intelligent progress, especially information based on state issues. Information leads to good decisions; good decisions lead to good government; and good government leads to a healthy state. The opportunity in front of us to recreate a public broadcast entity

that will enable us to cheerlead our state's enormous assets, demographics, and location, in our ongoing effort to attract and retain business desperately, is something that this will also enable. And, it will provide more transparency to everything that happens in Trenton, which is a healthy improvement. To me, this is not an option for you to debate; it's an obligation that you need to fulfill to do what you were elected to do: Nurture and provide intelligent growth to our state to enable it to achieve the prosperity we so desperately deserve. Supporting a vibrant New Jersey-owned and -operated public television network with all the positive attributes it will create is essential to the State to become more competitive economically, and more affordable for our citizens.

Thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, both.

I want to begin by just talking about some of the balance sheet that I see for Public Media New Jersey from 2024. Ask you, is this accurate, Number 1; and similar in 2025? But, what I'm seeing is approximately \$13 million in assets, including about \$2.5 million in property and equipment; and, a little over \$2.5 million in lease right-of-use assets. And, that in 2024, there was revenue of about \$11.5 million, and there was a reported deficit of about \$56,000. Does that sound about right in terms of assets, revenue, et cetera?

MR. KOBLER: The-- Some of the assets are within the Public Broadcasting Authority, so, if Rick Williams could speak to that, other assets would be likely retained for balance sheet purposes by WNET, as the parent.

So, there are two -- there are, obviously, Senator -- the tower assets that are controlled by the PBA. And, the largest revenue stream, really,

frankly, the only solid revenue stream that I could speak of as the past chairman, would be the rentals that were derived from the placement of cell service on those towers, which was a number of about \$3.9 million in revenues. The total revenue sheet that I happened to bring with me, it comes off of the fiscal 2026 business plan from WNET has total revenues of 2024 of just shy of \$12 million with management operating results surplus of \$5,000. And, I can identify, if you would like, the soft spots on the revenue side, which is what led to this.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Got it, all right.

So, but, as this body in the Legislature discusses what the governing entity will be as we move forward, I'm trying to get a sense of both the assets, but also the amount of funding necessary, in total, whether that's public funding, private funding, we'll work on that moving forward. But, what is your thoughts on the top level dollar that we need here?

MR. KOBLER: So, I'm going to throw one person's number out there, because, I think you're right, it's very realistic to get a sense of it.

My sense of generally what it costs to produce the news program was about in the \$5 million range. I have pulled a number out where I feel it would be appropriate to try to air arts programming along the lines of \$2 million. I'll let Mr. Daggett speak to what his funding would be, which would be another \$5 million. So, here we are at a number of about \$12 million, and it is -- we would broadcast to the extent we could finance it. But, my expectation would be that the Senators would look at us, if I'm still involved, and do exactly what Senator Littell did 33 years ago. He said, "You have to wean this from State government." And, so, we created the NJN Foundation back then, and we raised -- and, Tom Bracken was involved in it -- we raised

over \$100 million over the course of 12 or 14 years. So, the hub model that I've suggested allows for philanthropy. And, if I were sitting in your shoes -- and, I'm not, I'm not sitting in those chairs -- I would say, "OK, NJPBS goes dark on July 30th. We can create something that makes everybody in the State, and all of the players who will speak today, generally pretty happy and representational. We're going to launch you." Remember, as you know better than most, we're subject to appropriation state. Here is a number for the first year. In fact, Senator Zwicker, that was contemplated in the report 15 years ago, that there be sufficient funds to launch at least the organization. But, the warning is that you have to philanthropically work to try to reduce that amount of funding over a span of -- I'm saying this -- three to five years, without the guarantee, because we're subject to appropriation state, that it won't be funded for any longer than one year. That's how it worked with WNET. With WNET, the dollars were -- it was in a contract -- but, they were, frankly, really always subject to the ability of the State to produce them.

MR. BRACKEN: Senator, when New Jersey Public Television was first started, a lot of the top line funding was through corporate donations, corporate sponsorships, very strong corporate support. Over the years that has diminished to the point now, where that is a very insignificant amount of money from top level revenue for the current NJPBS. If we bring this back into the State, which is controlled by New Jersey; focuses on New Jersey; focuses on everything in New Jersey, sports, business, art, government. I've already spoken to several major corporations in New Jersey who said they would be very interested in coming back to support that because they knew the value-- They would know the value of what's being produced.

So, the top-level revenue of this organization will be enhanced, I think, by a lot more corporate donations, corporate sponsorships, and that will be a very big assist, and hopefully minimize the amount that the State government will have to fund.

MR. KOBLER: Senator, when we-- When I first chaired NJN, we funded -- the State funded -- NJPBA to the tune of including the rental of the old studio, \$30 million a year; \$30 million.

Which, if you did the exponential inflationary calculation, could be close to \$60 million. The number that we ask the State for, this year, as a hold-harmless that the State rejected in the negotiations for WNET was \$8 million. Which was *\$8 million*, which was only \$2 million more than the amount, and the reason we wanted the \$8 million was because of what happened in Washington with the CPB money. And, that rejection led WNET to say, "No more."

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Questions from the--

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: Thank you, again, gentlemen, for your testimony; I appreciate the sincerity.

Going back to the altruistic nature of the formation of PBS to begin with. I'm going to share some criticism -- and, I believe in this criticism -- but, I think if you pay attention to it, it's probably going to be the best advice that anybody here is going to wind up giving you, even though it's going to come from a partisan nature. You've got to get the trust of the public, and I think, quite frankly, PBS, nationally, has lost that trust. A gentleman who used to be the senior editor at NPR, Uri Berliner, had written a book. And, he was arguing that NPR's coverage reflects a progressive

ideology. He claimed that in the D.C. area, 87% of the editorial positions -- I'm sorry, 87 of the editorial positions -- were held by Democrats; zero were held by Republicans.

Mr. Berliner is not a conservative by any stretch. He's pretty well known; he won a Peabody award; a Loeb award; an Edward R. Murrow award; and a Society for Professional Journalism; attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. So, this is not coming out of the mouth of a conservative; it's coming out the mouth of a progressive. But, he sees what's going on. If you want to win the public trust, you've got to be able to present both sides of the story. I will share them privately, if you want, but there's a list of news programs that were done that did not share both sides of the story. Amazingly, I found that PBS, I believe, in the early 2000s had double digit, 27% of conservative support. Now, they're down to low single digits. And, you've got to ask yourself, "Why?" So, if we're going to ask for taxpayer money, we should be asking for taxpayer money for *all* groups that are involved. And, the way that you do that is you just present the fair and balanced and transparent view of the news. Your turn.

MR. KOBLER: Senator, I would like to respond to that, and I appreciate that enormously.

I embrace Assemblywoman Dunn's testimony about PBS. If I were constructing this, it would optimally, for the use of dollars in the payment of PBS stations, not be a PBS station. It would be a New Jersey station. It does not need to be a PBS station. So, the construction of it would include the news broadcast. Remember, if you watch Briana Vannozzi, we bring on different opinion makers, but it is not a network of talking heads about opinions. I would add -- like I said before -- arts programming; I would

add this hearing. My feeling would be that we have the press here today; the building in some sense is wired or to be wired; I would want to see you on the air. I would want to see Supreme Court arguments. We were the ones who hosted *Learning Live* during COVID. I would want the NJEA teachers volunteering to teach. I would want to see high school sports; I would want to see it be about New Jersey. I think the benefit is here; we can take the money under the charge of trying to wean -- like Senator Littell made us do 30x years ago -- and have this be the New Jersey network; the New Jersey vision, but not a replay of what comes out of the two major cities to our side. So, that people, when they're looking for, as Senator Ruiz said, they're actually watching you. And, I have a home in another state where I can turn on PBS and I can watch the Legislative hearings all the time which are streamed, but they're not over the air of non-paywall TV to have mom and dad wind up watching them. That's what we're suggesting here for something that is, to me, I believe, just as cost effective to wind up making for -- amplifying -- it throughout the state. And, I know I've overused my time; but, I would not be going in the direction of NPR or PBS.

MR. BRACKEN: I would also add to your question about buy-in.

When New Jersey Public Television first started, the buy-in was obvious: Used to have fundraising teams from corporations on every night; they would line up; be on TV; make calls; receive calls live. Their corporations were lined up to sign their teams up for that. The buy-in was extraordinary from a retail standpoint. That has diminished over the years to the point now where that isn't done at all. You see on public broadcasting a couple of people who are talking about raising funds, who are paid people,

but no retail involved whatsoever. That retail aspect of getting companies to have their employees on TV, raising funds, and taking calls about the station, I think can be easily recreated. New Jersey's starving for this. I don't think that the buy-in issue is the problem at all. Because, the corporations would support this, I think then the retail audience would support this. So, recreating enthusiasm for this, I think, would be very easy to do *if* it was owned and operated by New Jersey, and to Scott's point, an independent entity.

MR. KOBLER: And, editorially independent of any organization that is a State-created organization where there are gubernatorial, and respectfully, even legislative appointments; that the editorial integrity resides at that level.

SENATOR ZWICKER: We'll get to the--

MR. KOBLER: Yes, Senator.

SENATOR ZWICKER: We'll get to the-- Eventually we'll get to what that organization will look like.

MR. KOBLER: Yes, yes, at your prerogative.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: And, counsel, I echo, and I agree with what you said as far as what the content should be and how you vision PBS.

My fear, again, is that eventually editorial will drive the news content, and then we're just chasing our tails right back where we were and you lose me. You keep talking because you're getting it back, but how do we guarantee that we can't go back to that position where all of a sudden, people turning on the television and it's just one side, and you're only getting one side of the story.

MR. KOBLER: Because, you and I are going to have a cup of coffee -- but, not an *ex parte* conversation -- but, we're going to have a cup of coffee; but, you're also going to see the agreement that will contain it in the editorial integrity requirements.

And, remember, we're not talking about an opinion show; we're talking about people; the quality; and strength of recording, historically, of a Bri, or a Kent Manahan, or Michael Aron, where the history of the *only* statewide non-paywalled reporting that was done in the state.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: And, how would you envision a non-partisan oversight over PBS?

MR. KOBLER: Because, I-- It would-- Well, first of all, I wouldn't characterize it as PBS; I would characterize it as Jersey's public media station.

But, it would be a board of, I would think, the same group that I led, which would be people who you would know; who were business and civic leaders who were enormously respected in the state. And, frankly, the construction of that over time has even included people who might even have partisan registrations, that they're split between both parties. If that made people feel comfortable, I would be perfectly fine with that because people are intelligent enough not always to express themselves that way.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: I would tell you, I wouldn't care what their political label is; I just don't want to feel it when they're delivering the news, or editorializing it, and making everything fit the editorial.

MR. KOBLER: Well, I think that that can be articulated in an agreement with the State, because editorial policies are written, and frankly, should be followed.

And, the reason that I generally have liked getting my news at that layer is because I don't need someone to think for me. I just want to know what the news is and I can figure it out by myself.

MR. BRACKEN: I would agree with Scott, that the construct of the board would dictate the fact that your fears would not be material -- would not happen.

The board is going to do something with this organization that we don't have right now, which is unbiased, direct information about New Jersey to the public. That's what we want to create, and I think, the people who would be brought onto this board would have to be -- would have to kind of mandate that that would happen. And, I think, knowing some of the people who would be involved, that would happen.

MR. KOBLER: And, my construct also -- Senator, if you'd indulge me another 60 seconds -- would be to add the content providers who we have already on public TV, whether it's on NJ; whether it's Carlos Medina or Steve Adubato, who do a very good job of reporting things around the state.

The key to this is not, in my opinion, to beat PBS, it's generational to make this from High Point to Cape May; to make this about New Jersey. And, I've even said to Bracken, "If there is a League of Municipalities event, and the League wants to use the pipes to broadcast what is going on there; or the Chamber does; or Citizen's Action wants to; or whatever the organization is that wants to-- If the production quality is good enough, and were edifying the citizens of the state, why not? Why wouldn't we take that content? Because, we really are the digital -- and, we're not just over the air, because we're clearly providing it in a modern way -- and, you

know that the Transfer Act said you can't operate within the state. But, we would provide a specific town hall for the State of New Jersey. Yes, Senator.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

MR. KOBLER: Thank you, enormously.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Appreciate it.

MR. KOBLER: Thank you enormously.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

I see Assembly Majority Leader Greenwald has come in. Assemblyman? Majority Leader, would you like to come up and speak?

I just want to say thank you for your leadership on media and broadcasting for quite some time.

ASSEMBLYMAN LOUIS GREENWALD: Chairman, thank you very much.

Chairman, Madam Vice Chair, members of the Committee, thank you for being here, thank you for holding this event. This is an issue that is deeply personal for me. When my first introduction to public service was my mother answering an ad in the newspaper when I was 9 years old. The ad said if you were interested in public service and wanted to run for office, report to this building and make a speech in front of local county committee people. It launched a career for a young woman who was never afforded the opportunity to go to college; her father died when she was 3 -- at the age of 3 for her from cancer. When she graduated from high school at the top of her class, she couldn't afford to go to college. She ended up working at a company where she met my father training young male executives how to climb the corporate ladder; a ladder that they would never let her set foot on. The talk of breaking glass ceilings began very much for

my mom in 1977 with a small crack when she became the first woman ever elected mayor of our home town; 12th largest town in the state of New Jersey.

In that moment, that ad changed the course of her life, and ultimately, mine. It was my introduction to public service, and when my mom passed away, again, the headline in the newspaper was that a community had lost its mother; it was a dedication to our family's commitment of being involved in government as if you were working with your family in times of need. That's the power of local news; it doesn't just inform, it invites; it inspires; it opens the door for someone with no college degree; raised by immigrant grandparents to step into leadership and serve your community. But, the media landscape in our state looks very different today, and it has for quite some time.

Back in 2018, we saw the warning signs: Newsrooms were shrinking; local papers were folding; and, too often, people were left in the dark about what was happening right outside their front door. We knew we had to do something bold to push back against the collapse of local journalism. So, I worked with a very dear friend of mine who I served in with the Assembly, then-Senator Loretta Weinberg, to create the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, a first of its kind, publicly funded nonprofit dedicated to strengthening local news and boosting civic engagement across the state. The idea was simple, but powerful. The health of our democracy depends on the strength of our local news. When we invest in honest, reliable, community-based information, we empower people. We bring them into the process and we start to build something we've lost far too much of in recent years: Trust. What do we believe when we're reading something? Is it true? What makes the Consortium so impactful is that it centers voices

too often left out of traditional media: Underserved communities; low-income neighborhoods; and communities of color. It says loud and clear, “Your stories matter; you have a right to information that speaks to your experiences; covers your community; and gives you tools to make informed decisions about the issues that affect your life.”

The challenges we saw in 2018 have only grown more urgent. Since 2005, more than one third of all newspapers in the United States have closed. And, nearly three-quarters of newspapers have disappeared altogether. Here in New Jersey, the consequences are real: A 2022 Stockton University poll found that 34% of adults said none of the news sources they consume provide any information about their local area. And, 51% said there isn’t enough local -- enough state or local news coverage to help them make informed decisions during elections. We’ve seen that reflected in focus groups and polling of elected officials for many years, and challengers that are running for office for the first time. They don’t know what they stand for; what their positions are; whether you agree or disagree with them. The work isn’t just about journalism, it’s about democracy; it’s about community; and it’s about creating a shared truth in an age where truth is increasingly up for grabs. Today, over one third of New Jersey residents get their news from non-traditional sources. Twenty-one percent from social media, and 14% relying on family and friends. And, while there’s value in speed and reach of those platforms, we know that algorithms don’t always reward facts. They reward engagement; they reward outrage; and they lead to echo chambers, misinformation, and growing division. It takes away the ability to think -- to think critically and creatively to form your own opinions. That’s why the work of the Civic Information Consortium is so critical; it’s helping us build

the infrastructure we need to ensure that every New Jerseyan has access to trusted, relevant local information.

Research consistently shows that communities with strong local journalism see higher voter turnouts; stronger civic engagement; more candidates running for office; and greater government accountability. Unfortunately, the trends we're seeing out of Washington seems more focused on silencing critical coverage than supporting a free and independent press, leaving State legislatures to carry the weight of protecting local news and public broadcasting. The closure of New Jersey PBS represents the loss of a trusted source of State and local news for New Jersey families. But, it also creates an opportunity to rethink and rebuild what public broadcasting in New Jersey can and should be in the years ahead. Just last week, like many of you, I did an interview with Steve Adubato that most of my constituents will likely never see, unless they happen to watch PBS or WHYI. And, it's not just the smaller news networks that are seeing declining viewership; several cable networks are experiencing double digit drops in primetime audiences due to shifting consumption habits, predominantly driven by yet younger demographics who favor streaming, digital platforms, and social media. Researchers at University of California, Irvine, who have been studying attention spans for 20 years, found that the average time a person can focus on one thing has dropped from 2.5 minutes to 45 seconds. This should concern all of us; it concerns me deeply. Public broadcasting must do a better job of reaching audiences, but in an age of shrinking attention spans, we have to remember that journalism is a service, not entertainment. Our primary commitment is to the truth; we cannot chase virality and clicks to sell ads.

So, the question before us is this: How do we meet people where they are, and adapt a changing media landscape, while staying true to the values of journalism and public service? We cannot rely on New York and Philadelphia media markets to tell New Jersey's story. New Jersey needs a robust, independent statewide public broadcasting system that ensures every resident has access to trusted, relevant information. The work that we did in a bipartisan fashion around the Consortium is a framework and a model to build upon this to continue to grow this.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak; I look forward to working with all of you to make this vision a reality. Chairman, thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Majority Leader.

I'm very appreciative of you bringing up the Consortium; it's just so important. I was proud to be a co-sponsor of your legislation when I was in the Assembly, and continue to support it every single year. Right before you came in, we talked a bit about just the finances necessary to move forward, and we all know that we have a difficult budget in front of us. I'm curious if you could comment your thoughts on -- as you talk about Consortium as a success; both what does that mean in terms of, from your perspective, moving forward for public broadcasting? And, then, perhaps just off the cuff, what does that mean in terms of budgets, how we approach this from a public-private perspective?

ASSEMBLYMAN GREENWALD: I think we need to build a responsible budget around what this will cost to do.

I would say to you that budgets are always difficult. And, what we have always said, regardless of what side of the political aisle you're on, is that budgets are a reflection of our priorities. The reason why this was done

in a bipartisan fashion is because I think all of us, regardless of party, whether Democrat or Republican, believed that the First Amendment is the most cherished -- the reason it is our First Amendment is because it is our most cherished right. And, that access to this information and to journalistic integrity is critically important. I wouldn't sit here to tell you-- I think the purpose of this Committee and why you're hosting this is to begin the dialogue around how much money will we need to do this. And, I do think with the advancement of technology and investment in other resources, what we knew when I started my career 30 years ago, as much as I enjoyed NJ News and NJTV, that there is a more refined way of doing that where we can literally get more bang for our buck. There are ways to use the social media outlets to transfer and to communicate news, but it needs to be centered on journalistic, professional integrity that is taught, and understanding the need and the benefit of having reliable sources and not just opinions that come off as news.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Thank you, Lou.

You owe me a golf outing, I think at Pine Valley.

ASSEMBLYMAN GREENWALD: That's a pretty ambitious ask, but I will work on that, Senator.

(laughter)

I mean, we could have started a little smaller than Pine Valley, but that is an ambitious ask that I will do my best to achieve.

SENATOR SINGER: I think that's the last time you and I played golf together.

What I really think I'd like you to think about as the Majority Leader, we have the Majority Leader of the Senate here, also, we should look at a permanent funding source so that we don't come every year in front of budget and say, with our hand out, saying, "Could we be funded this year?" If you're going to see a future in it, that's where I think you have to go. And, I'm not sure that's where the source is; we're going to have to identify it. But, at least then you know that this is the source; this is the money you're getting; and, figure it out. But, instead of going every year -- and, this is going to be a tough year, you know that -- I know every year they say that, but, this year's going to be a tough year; we're looking a \$4 billion shortfall. But, I'm saying is, we really should identify a permanent funding source to solve this problem so they can go forward knowing the money's there every year. Does that help you work out?

ASSEMBLYMAN GREENWALD: Senator Singer, I couldn't agree more.

I think having a permanent identified funding source gives stability and reliability. This is a business model that must be built out, and like any business, it needs a reliable funding stream.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Majority Leader.

ASSEMBLYMAN GREENWALD: Chairman, thank you, thank you, everyone.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Next up, Chris Daggett, Consultant for the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, and Mike Rispoli, Senior Director of Journalism and Civic Information from the Free Press.

Chris, why don't you go first?

C H R I S T O P H E R J. D A G G E T T: Great, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Zwicker, Vice Chair Ruiz, and Committee members; my name is Chris Daggett, I'm the Board Chair of the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, an independent, 501(c)(3) nonprofit that funds organizations dedicated to building and sustaining local news and information, with a focus on marginalized and news desert communities. I'm speaking today from nearly 45 years of public policy experience in New Jersey, including 15 years working to restore and build local news capacity in the state. As we all know too well, local news outlets across the country have been decimated over the past 20 years as the advertising business model that supported them has collapsed. The Consortium was created in 2018, as Assembly Majority Leader Greenwald just talked about, through a bipartisan effort of New Jersey residents and the State Legislature, led in part by Free Press and Mike Rispoli sitting to my left, but also, most importantly, by Assembly Majority Leader Greenwald and former Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, making New Jersey the first state in the nation to create a publicly supported initiative dedicated to building and strengthening local news outlets. Today, five other states are currently working to pass similar legislation because of New Jersey's leadership. Since receiving its first funding in 2019, and including fiscal year '26 that began on July 1, the Consortium has received a total of \$16 million in State budget appropriations. To date, we've awarded nearly \$11 million in grants across 18 counties; just under 50% of our grantee organizations are BIPOC-led. We've provided 132 grants since inception, and currently have over 40 active grantees who collectively have published 9,065 stories, 3,856 of which are ethnic, BIPOC, and Spanish

language-generated. In addition, 1,271 New Jersey residents in high school, community college, and university students have been trained in documenting public meetings, reporting, storytelling, or journalism, and we have to help build an effort to eradicate one of the largest local news deserts in the state: Salem County.

Now, with a termination of negotiations between WNET and New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority over a new programming services contract, New Jersey faces the prospect of public television going dark on June 30 of next year. Rather than seeing this as a potential loss, we should view it as a rare opportunity to develop a network of collaborative news outlets by and for New Jersey, where, for the first time, we will no longer be under the control and in the shadows of New York and Philadelphia media organizations. This network should be governed by a non-profit board and in collaboration with New Jersey's universities -- like Montclair State which has been a great partner for the Consortium -- where workforce development and the journalism pipeline are a key focus, and studio capacity is abundant. Its structure and operations should be informed, first and foremost, by a statewide visioning process that includes input from a wide variety of stakeholders, including residents; policy experts; legislators; and business, cultural and community leaders, among others. We anticipate beginning that kind of visioning process within the next month. A reimaged New Jersey local news ecosystem must be sustainable; collaborative; and accessible to every resident. It should be a trusted-- It should include trusted, hyperlocal newsrooms, such as those funded by the Consortium. Legacy media, broadcasters, investigative journalists, and local storytellers to expand reporting capacity, share resources, and ensure that high quality, trustworthy,

cultural, educational, and public service news and information reaches the public.

Programming should include New Jersey-focused local news; education; the arts; public affairs; community activities; high school and college sports; State Legislature and Supreme Court proceedings; and civics to name just a few. A comprehensive solution to this issue includes long-term, stable funding from a combination of public, private, and philanthropic sources and should include funding for both NJTV and the Consortium. We ought to think about this holistically. And, it should have a clear mandate to prioritize a public good, and ensure that trustworthy, equitable, widespread, and comprehensive coverage of all towns and counties in the state is provided. The many and varied communities of the state should have the opportunity to be heard, represented, and informed, especially in this age of increasing -- or, increased misinformation and polarization. New Jersey must work toward establishing a resilient and inclusive local news ecosystem that supports local reporters and newsrooms; fosters civic engagement; and provides residents with reliable information on issues that directly affect their day-to-day lives. Creating a well-resourced, independent, and forward-looking news, entertainment and cultural affairs entity focused on collaboration, will ensure that all residents in New Jersey have the tools they need to engage with and participate in their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present comments, I look forward to working with the Legislature, and New Jersey Governor-elect Mikie Sherill, on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to develop a network of collaborative news outlets and broadcasting, *by and for* New Jersey, not New York, not Philadelphia, New Jersey. Thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Mr. Rispoli.

MIKE RISPOLI: Chair Zwicker, Vice Chair Ruiz, members of the Committee; thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Mike Rispoli, and I'm a Senior Director at Free Press Action, a national, nonpartisan, public interest organization that was created to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media. One note, we are not affiliated in any way with the very wise-led media company with a similar name, *The Free Press*. Instead, Free Press Action is a non-profit organization that, for the past two decades, has advocated for press freedom; local ownership; community-rooted journalism; and expanded funding for public media. I am a proud New Jersey native, and was a State House reporter for my hometown newspaper, the *Asbury Park Press*. I also worked at NJ Advanced Media and covered local government in Middlesex, Morris, and Somerset counties. Alongside thousands of New Jersey residents, including many in this room, I helped lead the grassroots campaign to create the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, which Chris just so wonderfully detailed. I serve as a board member of the Consortium, and I want to thank Assembly Majority Leader Greenwald and the Legislature for its continued support of this landmark initiative. For the last 10 years of my role with Free Press Action, I have had the honor of listening to and speaking with residents in every corner of this state; people from across the political spectrum; from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds; in rural communities and in urban centers. And, they all say the same thing: They need more and better high-quality local news in their community so that they can navigate their daily lives and feel connected to their neighbors.

In New Jersey where local commercial broadcasts is in short supply, to say the least, it must be said that policymakers should reaffirm and expand their decades-long commitment to the essential role that public broadcasting plays in the lives of your constituents. Public broadcasting provides free, accessible, high quality news and information that fills a critical need for residents of the State that otherwise would not be met. That said, this is a moment that also calls for a reexamination of what residents actually need from their public media system, which is supported by their tax dollars. The New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority was established in 1968 to address, quote, “The inability of both commercial and public broadcasters to adequately cover public affairs in the State of New Jersey.” Today, the gaps that public broadcasting was created to fill have widened greatly. Without a doubt, broadcasting is an important medium, but the New Jersey media landscape is very different now than it was in 1968, possibly more fraught and fractured than ever. The elimination of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting; funding cuts at the state level; as well as a decades-long decline of local commercial newspapers has created a media environment where good information is hard to find, and people’s news feeds are increasingly filled with hate, clickbait, and misinformation. The end result is not just the thousands of journalism jobs that have been lost, or the dozens of newsrooms that have been closed. It is the countless communities that are left in the dark and don’t know what is going on in their schools; whether their water is safe to drink; where their tax dollars are going; which local businesses are opening or closing; and how to coordinate with their neighbors to solve problems. As the Majority Leader said, the research is clear: When local news declines or disappears, the effects on our communities are profound.

And, it's because of this that New Jersey policymakers have a foresight to create the New Jersey Civic Information Consortium, which builds upon the foundation of public media, and invests public dollars into ensuring that people have access to local news that commercial media no longer or never did provide. This innovative effort is being replicated around the country, with at least five other states having implemented or looking to introduce similar public grant-making models.

As Chris testified, the Consortium has provided millions in public funds to existing newsrooms, as well as to an emerging crop of innovative initiatives led by media veterans, upstart reporters, and engaged community members. These local leaders are rising to the occasion and giving people a voice who, for too long, have felt neglected, misrepresented, or even harmed by legacy media. So, while it may not look like public broadcasting, make no mistake: The statewide network of local news initiatives supported by the Consortium *are* public media. They receive public dollars; they fill the void left by the commercial market; and they provide public interest in educational news that people would not otherwise receive. The Consortium is helping build and fund the future of what public media will look like. This is a moment to be bold. I urge this Committee and policymakers to think expansively about what comes next, including how public broadcasting can be paired with public grant-making to build a 21st-century public media system that meets the needs of residents today. I encourage you all to take a holistic approach and invest in a more expansive vision of what public media is; what it does; and who it is for. Free Press Action and I stand ready to work together with you to make that happen, and to ensure that whatever is

created, it is rooted in providing New Jerseyans with public interest news that they need and deserve.

Thank you for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you; I just want to echo what you both said.

I agree, we need to think about both broadcasting and the Consortium together, holistically; it is the New Jersey ecosystem that we are talking about. Any questions?

Senator Burzichelli.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: I'd just like to add, at this juncture -- thank you, by the way, thank you for your testimony -- there's no one here that disagrees with anything that's been said philosophically about the need for New Jersey residents to know and their ability to find the news.

Really, in this setting, it's going to come down to money, and what does this look like? And, what are we investing in in a backbone structure to allow these other things to flourish. And, Senator Pennacchio, who I've served with in the Assembly, who I enjoyed greatly when he talked about one-sided journalism, I'll come to the defense of Fox Broadcasting and say, they have the right to say those things. As unbalanced as it may be.

(laughter)

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: It's not taxpayer funded.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Thank you, Joe.

But, there's a couple things we haven't gotten here. I see Scott is still here. We don't have a clear answer on how much is left in -- how much ever got into New Jersey Public Broadcasting Authority Trust Support Fund,

for example. Zero, he's saying now. So, the money from the sale of the assets never made it there, for reasons I mentioned earlier on in the sale talk.

MR. DAGGETT: So, the--

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Chris, you gonna-- Chris.

MR. DAGGETT: --the sale, back into 2016 with two television licenses as you know, and it-- New Jersey got more money for its licenses than any other state in the country.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Right.

MR. DAGGETT: We got \$332 million--

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Correct.

MR. DAGGETT: All but \$10 million of that was put into a budget hole at the time, the \$10 million was for maintenance of the towers that were then still in need of it.

That money disappeared in the budget hole. As you know, and I've spoken to you earlier, I would not have been in *The New York Times* suggesting that you set up, basically, an endowment with that money that be used to fund public media going forward, and if you treated it like a foundation and used 5% a year, we would have been having some \$16.5 million all these years to fund public media.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: Well, again hindsight's -- through the Chair -- hindsight is always important--

MR. DAGGETT: Always great.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: And, for a person who was there through those difficult times, financially-- I look back over to Senator Pennacchio; they were *hard* times, I mean we had no money.

So, the fact that that got absorbed -- now should it have been replenished as we rebuilt the surplus? A discussion for another day, because frankly, when public broadcasting in New Jersey moved over to WNET, it fell away from our view; people lost focus. We expected certain things to happen in part of that deal. Every committee room in the State House was supposed to be wired so these committees could be broadcast freely, and almost establishing a New Jersey State House C-SPAN, and then built from there. Now, OLS has done a wonderful job; the Legislature gave OLS money to wire these rooms and to operate the switching and cameras whichever body, to get these committee hearings out in large committee hearing rooms. But, we make that news here; that's a product we control, but I mean control in the bad sense, but, that resides here. So, as we think about this, this is about money. What are we going to invest in? Is there a backbone structure that we can develop, that lets everything spin off of that in a way that works? But, with a single focus being delivery of news on government is there going to be public money involved in this, with respect to these committee hearings; voting sessions; whatever else can be gained and pushed out through social media; digital-- And we do not want to lose these broadcast licenses, I don't think. But, we're not having that discussion today; that's got to be decided. These are real assets. Now, they may be worth less today than they were then, but they still have value. The fact that someone can use an antenna to watch something, that still is important.

So, as we continue to have this -- Chairman, I'll finish with this -- we just have to be mindful that in this setting, there are two focuses for us: 1. money; and 2. what do we get for it, and how do we answer for it, probably 3. I suppose. But, the work you guys are doing? Wonderful. When you

went out Free Press, I turned to the Chairman, “Oh, we have Free Press, that’s very good.”

(laughter)

So, Lou Greenwald said it: How do we get to where people are? We can’t expect people to come to us to find, so how do we get in front of them, with respect to delivering the information that we have? But, Chairman, we still have a lot of questions we’re not going to get done today, but for this group, collectively, if we’re going to be advising the general body of what comes next, we got-- All this information is important, and, by the way, Chris, as the administration mentioned -- as Treasury mentioned -- when they may go out with an RFP. Has anyone heard base?

MR. DAGGETT: No, I think they were awaiting the direction from the Governor-elect, as to how she would want to go forward with it.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: I’m sensing there’s going to be an RFP; but, I’m not sensing there’ll be an award in this administration, but I’m sensing there may be an RFP.

MR. DAGGETT: Probably.

SENATOR BURZICHELLI: So, this hearing is timely and important.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Senator.

MR. DAGGETT: If I can just add, from Senator Pennacchio before when you talked about trust.

That is the key issue for us, and the work in the Consortium is, when we go into particularly a news desert type of community, we start with, “How do you get your news?” and, “Why do you trust it?” and, “What is

missing from that news that you might provide?” It’s an -- *the* fundamental aspect of our work.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Thank you, gentlemen.

We have one last panel. I’d like to call up Keith Strudler, Dean of the College of Communication and Media from Montclair State University; and, Mark Magyar, Director of the Steve Sweeney Center for Public Policy at Rowan University.

Keith Strudler, why don’t you go first?

KEITH STRUDLER, Ph.D.: Chair Zwicker, Vice Chair Ruiz, and members of the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee, I’m Keith Strudler, Dean of the College of Communication and Media at Montclair State University.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak today about the future of public media in New Jersey. The media industry has undergone seismic change over the last two decades. The business models that previously sustained news and information have failed, while at the same time, the public expects new forms and formats of content. That’s why we’re here today. There’s less money to sustain public broadcasting, while consumption habits continue to change. Many see this moment as a crisis; we see this as an opportunity to reimagine public media in New Jersey. At Montclair, we want to build a news and media ecosystem that benefits our entire state, creating statewide partnerships, while also training the next generation of journalists and storytellers.

We believe that education provides a solution for New Jersey for public media. And, Montclair wants to be a leader in that solution process.

For context, our College of Communication and Media at Montclair State University is filled with experienced professionals, journalists, news executives, finance -- excuse me, executive producers, engineers, and more. The university also has accounting, finance, legal, fundraising, HR. These build efficiency. Our facilities include 4K television studios and sound stages; a multi-platform news lab; audio production spaces; a new digital news studio; a social media listening center; and much more. We have the physical capabilities to help operate New Jersey Public Television on Day 1. With this ability, we can collectively conceive a new model that leverages partnerships with journalists, content creators, and centers of excellence across the state. We would work closely with New Jersey Spotlight News and maximize partnerships across the New Jersey News comments. We would work with the more 300 community-engaged news organizations, supported by our Center for Cooperative Media. We've already had collaborative conversations with other universities across the state to ensure *statewide* representation. We will reach every corner of New Jersey.

There are two other key points: First, across the nation, universities do this, and they do it well. More than 50% of NPR's member stations, and nearly 50 PBS television stations are affiliated with colleges and universities. They leverage their expertise, infrastructure, and commitment to public education. And, perhaps the most important thing I'll say today, public television is public education. Like other universities, Montclair would help use public media to help train the next generation of journalists and storytellers. And, second, we can do this with transparency and free from outside influence by establishing strong, publicly available ethical standards. We would follow university best practices, and use cornerstone documents

like Ethical Standards from the Society of Professional Journalists. And, as a public institution, we are accountable to public records requests, underpinning our commitment to transparency. At the risk of sounding simple, at this moment of transition, someone has to keep on the lights for New Jersey public television. We are ready to help make sure that happens. We will do it with innovation, collaboration, and with lower costs for the State, and we will help build a future of journalists in New Jersey.

I thank you for your time and consideration.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

Mark.

MARK MAGYAR: Light's on?

SENATOR ZWICKER: Light's on.

MR. MAGYAR: Thank you.

Rose was in my chair, I think, the last time I was in the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee for a hearing. I was the staffer. The-- I'm here today, I've been representing Rowan on the broad working group that has been working, including Scott and Chris and many of those who testified here today, who are attempting to develop a solution for a New Jersey network. But, I'm here today as much as anything else, to speak as a former journalist. I was a 30-year journalist in New Jersey, and I spent 15 years in nonprofit journalism between New Jersey Spotlight and running a New Jersey reporter magazine. It's important to remember that in 2010 when Chris Christie sold off the radio licenses and had transferred WNET to New York -- transferred a New Jersey network to New York -- New Jersey at that point was making an \$11 million contribution to New Jersey television at that time. A New Jersey Spotlight -- I want to highlight one thing here -- New Jersey

Spotlight merged into WNET in 2019, and in 2020 they created New Jersey Spotlight TV News. I would argue that the coverage of New Jersey that was provided by the combination of New Jersey Spotlights end up reporting with the TV network and the TV networks' ability to showcase that reporting, provided better information to New Jerseyans than the New Jersey network had provided in the past.

Where was the fatal flaw? The fatal flaw was the -- Christie transferring it over to New York. When the-- When we had the cuts in -- \$1.1 billion national cut to a public broadcasting, combined with, by the way, a reduction from the \$1 million to \$250,000 last year in the Governor's budget for New Jersey Spotlight, it created a double financial crisis for the network. Because it was under New York, it was New York that made the cuts. New Jersey PBS and New Jersey Spotlight had no say in what got cut; they had no advance warning of the cuts; they had no ability to respond in advance in an attempt to raise money to offset the cuts. So, again, we really need to focus on getting this back in New Jersey. I've provided some of a detailed testimony, but I just want to go through a few key points where (indiscernible) here.

Number 1, New Jersey Spotlight TV News needs to be a New Jersey entity with a New Jersey board dedicated to a New Jersey interest. I think everyone here agrees on that. That's Number 1.

Secondly, and, I'm speaking to this as a reporter, a New Jersey Spotlight TV News needs to be its own, independent, nonprofit, run independently of any State entity. If it's -- offered to house the network at Montclair's is a great option. But, it needs to be separate; the news operation has to be independent and separate from any State entity.

Thirdly, New Jersey Spotlight TV News as it's reconstituted needs to be a truly statewide entity. Rowan University is prepared (indiscernible) a South Jersey-based TV studio, editing facility. But, you need to have-- You need to be able to cover the state from around the state. If it's always a decision whether or not to send a reporter two hours south to cover a story in Glassboro; they're not going to send a reporter to our south often to cover a story in Glassboro. Again, whatever the entity is, Rowan is very interested in providing that service.

New Jersey Spotlight TV, for this to move forward, you need to decide whether there's going to be a financial commitment from the State; at the minimum it needs to be that \$3.9 million cell tower licensing fee; I'll encourage Governor Sherill. I guarantee that our upcoming budget, it includes at least the \$1 million that was the original subsidy for New Jersey Spotlight TV News. I figure it would be very difficult if we don't know what the State -- that the State is willing to be a participant; I think it would be very difficult for any entity -- and, including Montclair State -- to respond to an RFP, want to know where to go forward. And, I think there needs to be a commitment I think, that this is certainly a valuable commitment for the State. I cannot imagine losing our only real statewide source of news.

As an aside to Senator Pennacchio, the -- one of the things I would've said would be that New Jersey Spotlight News is where I see a Declan O'Scanlon critiquing the budget. I don't think we will find that like NBC in New York, needless to say. I think there is an opportunity, like everyone has said today, to reconceive New Jersey Spotlight TV News, to be able to provide more of the programming to local news operations to cover

high school sports championships; to cover the arts. This is an opportunity to reconceive how we do things.

And, then, finally, this has to be done quickly. The time is of the essence here, I can't emphasize this enough; we're talking about a-- WNET is talking about maintaining the broadcast after July 1; I'm not sure how they plan to do so; the details have been sketchy. The cuts that have occurred have had a major impact. When decisions were made on cuts, the health reporter who covered New Jersey health issues was cut as we were going into a government shutdown focused on healthcare coverage. A previous layoff had cut New Jersey Spotlight's founding energy reporter in a campaign that was focused pretty heavily on whether or not an energy freeze was viable. My concern is if we don't have a plan going forward, this network as it exists could atrophy to a point where we'd almost have to start from scratch. So, I really think that time is of the essence here. Speaking from the Rowan perspective as well we're very interested in being as involved as possible in crafting a solution on a collaborative basis.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you.

MR. MAGYAR: Thank you.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Any questions?

SENATOR SINGER: Yes, just one thing.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Senator Singer.

SENATOR SINGER: Thank you.

Thank you both-- Thank you very much for your testimony, both of you; it's important. Now, we've all seen -- and I was here in that hearing back in the early '90s -- I think I was the only one who was here. But, we've seen a decay in reporting, both locally and county, and the state. I can

remember, they used to have a reporter's row here, newspapers row; we don't see that anymore. Huge change, people no longer read newspapers the way they did, only the mostly seniors do, and therefore, we've got to change the mode of operation to reach to younger people and get them more interested into it. Because a lot of the things we talk about is things that people want to hear, but they just don't see. So, I think we're going to have to rethink a lot of these things; how we get to younger people; how we entice them. I think the industry-- And, both Montclair and Rowan have to take a look at the salary ranges and how that has to change because, a lot of these news outlets don't pay a lot. And, a young person who spends a lot of money to get a degree at Montclair or Rowan finds themselves at really, almost a little above the minimum wage in some cases. And, it makes it tough to come into the industry. And, that's both from the reporting aspect to the broadcasting aspect, too. We always see the people in New York or on national, and the kind of money they make; that's not how much they make locally; you should know that. And, I think we have to rethink that a little bit in the industry to encourage that, because, otherwise, people are not going to come into it. And, I think when you take a look at where you go in that industry, you want to be able to make a living out of it. And, we've really seen with the close of newspapers, again, the last major newspaper that stopped printing was the *Star-Ledger*. And, again, it's something we have to think about encompassing all of this; where we go with the industry and how we help the industry grow and get young people involved and watching and seeing things, not just from their usual news sources, like they do maybe a different news source, our news source, which I think is important.

SENATOR ZWICKER: Thank you, Senator.

Thank you to you both. I want to thank the members of this Committee; I want to thank everyone who testified today. Echoing what you just said, we understand that time is short; that we have until July to come up with a solution, as Senator Burzichelli talked about. We have to come up with what a governance looks like; structure; and what the finances are going to look like. But, the alternative is just simply not acceptable, and, so, we will work quickly and we will work deliberatively to come up with what we believe is the future of New Jersey broadcasting, here moving forward. So, thank you to everybody.

DR. STRUDLER: Thank you very much.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)