

HOW TO SAVE PACIFICA – ACT NOW, OR LOSE IT FOREVER

by Mitchel Cohen,
Chair, WBAI Local Station Board

Last February (2010) I wrote a detailed report on the need to vastly improve WBAI's "fulfillment" rate, as a first step towards stanching the hemorrhaging that would bring down the station. After much debate, there is now general recognition of the problem (and solutions) I outlined. While recent improvements in the fulfillment rate show that management is addressing that concern, the 10 percent increase still needed in *the current* fulfillment rate indicates that making this or that minor reform in the way in which pledges are garnered and premiums delivered is not sufficient to reclaim the more than \$1 million in pledges that get "left on the table" every year at WBAI, as outlined in my report.

Over the past decade, the systemic financial problems at WBAI (and other stations) – including the poor management, corruption, and the \$1 million/year incompetence stated above – were masked by bailouts from other stations. But as the crisis deepens and all stations are unable to meet expenses (let alone pay off their debts), the mask is torn from the face. Pacifica has a very short time – perhaps as little as 6 months – to, to put it bluntly, take in millions of dollars more than it is shelling out.

With WBAI, KPFA and other Pacifica stations unable to meet expenses, some have proposed triaging paid staff, even though they are performing necessary jobs. Whose job is more necessary, the Chief engineer, Premiums director or News director? Clearly, *all are necessary*. It is my contention that while prudent cuts at some stations may be needed for the purpose of rooting out corruption and waste, **wholesale cuts for the purpose of balancing the budget are illusory and counterproductive. They will not accomplish what they set out to do and are exactly the opposite of what is needed.**

Two years ago the National Finance Committee directed that WBAI slash payroll expenses by 30 percent. While I and others at WBAI opposed that directive by KPFA's Brian Edward-Tiekart and KPFT's Mike Martin, the key figures on the NFC, a majority of the LSB from all factions unfortunately supported that wrongheaded "solution" for WBAI. They failed to understand the systemic causes for WBAI's disastrous financial spiral and how to rectify it. They imposed on the station the same right-wing, anti-working class "solution" to a common problem facing non-profit corporations today; they added to WBAI's history of mismanagement a devastating blow to which we have been unable to recover.

We see how this approach has actually worsened the already-difficult financial squeeze at WBAI. One simply cannot cut paid staff below a certain threshold and still have viable programming that reflects the concerns and maintains the interest of the listeners.

So if wholesale cuts in staff costs do not address the systemic problem, what's the answer?

Pacifica needs to EXPAND its membership base.

Any discussion on finances by the governing bodies (PNB and LSB) that does not start with "How do we increase membership ... quickly?" is irresponsible and again misses the point. Especially with its 50,000 effective watt antenna atop the Empire State Building able to reach 18 million people, WBAI's

170,000 listeners and 16,500 members are good figures to build on, but they do not represent a sufficient base to sustain the radio station in today's circumstances.

At WBAI, each member contributes on average around \$114 per year. (Actually, that figure needs to be delineated more clearly, as it is a mean and does not offer us a sufficient breakdown of how many contributed in the course of the year at each level. But for the purposes of this letter, it is a good enough estimate.) At KPFA, the figure is similar. So, where there is an anticipated \$800,000 shortfall (KPFA), approximately 6,600 *new members* averaging \$114 per member are needed to make up that difference.

Yes, there are other things to do simultaneously – fundraising; increasing fulfillment rates (by phone-calls to those who pledged but who didn't send in their contribution); concerts; administration cuts; re-negotiating WBAI's current rent with the landlord; professionalization of the website; returning Gary Null to WBAI's airwaves. Those can reduce the deficits significantly, so that, should they be done perhaps only 2,500 new members would be needed for WBAI (and also KPFA) to become sustainable.

There are a number of ways in combination to address this. There has to be an air of excitement. We must have a culture NOT of money, money, money but of increasing MEMBERSHIP, of making new members (and old ones) feel wanted. The staff has a critical role to play here in generating that sense of excitement, of shared purpose, of organizing, of being on a mission. Good management would both inspire and coordinate those efforts.

To that end, I want to re-propose a project that Steve Brown mentioned 8 years ago – 6 month trial memberships for \$1. (I was at that meeting as a delegate from the Concerned Friends of WBAI and wrote it up in my minutes of the meeting. The Program Director, Bernard White, rejected the proposal. Valerie van Isler, the GM at the time, was interested but as usual, the proposal was not implemented.) Yes, you heard me. Trial memberships for \$1, with the goal of adding 50,000 such trial memberships to WBAI next year. What progressive-thinking person would turn down a \$1 trial membership? The point: We'd gain the contact info for 50K people, they would listen to the station, we'd send them a folio (remember that?) and fundraising appeal letter, and 17 percent would hopefully renew their memberships at the end of 6 months. Remember, each member averages \$114 per year in contributions. A 17 percent renewal of the \$1 trial memberships would add 8500 members, more than enough to offset the deficits and enable WBAI to begin paying off its \$1.2 million debt to Pacifica to boot.

To accomplish this at WBAI, KPFA and elsewhere, the stations would organize listeners and staff to incite and invite people to become part of a “crusade” for the station. Teams of staff and listener volunteers would set up tables at events and communities throughout the listening area. If we send out just 5 teams per day x 300 days/year = 1,500 tables per year, each table would only need to average 30-35 new trial memberships per day. All staff would have to “get out there” at least once-a-week and organize, create a buzz – to save their own shows and the station. We would put a “thermometer” onto the website, and use the air to let people know where the teams would be the next day. Again, create a buzz by using the airwaves for this mission. Can we generate the kind of excitement among listeners as well as staff to embark on that year-long venture?

THAT is what is needed to create a sustainable WBAI and Pacifica. **EXPAND THE MEMBERSHIP BASE BY 30 PERCENT.** Remember, we do not have much time.

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