

The Honorable Bill Saffo
Mayor, City of Wilmington, NC
Senate Committee Hearing
September 23, 2008
Written Testimony
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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the City of Wilmington's perspective on being the first in the country to make the DTV switch.

It is an honor to be invited here to speak today. My name is Bill Saffo and I am the Mayor of the City of Wilmington, North Carolina.

My office was contacted on May 6, 2008, by Mr. Gary McNair, General Manager for WECT TV in Wilmington, inviting me to attend the press conference here in Washington on May 8 announcing that the City of Wilmington was chosen by the FCC to be the first in the country to switch from analog to digital television. While I was excited for this historical event to occur in our great city, I was also concerned that being the first, would the FCC make available to us the necessary resources to inform, educate and to provide converter boxes to our residents by the Big Switch date of September 8?

I am proud to say that those concerns were quickly diminished as meetings and conversations began immediately between my office and members of the FCC, Chairman Martin, and the staff of Mr. Louis Sigalos, Chief of Consumer Affairs & Outreach Division.

It was clear to me that the staff of the FCC had all intentions to be by our side through this transition, even setting up a local office in our Chamber of Commerce. They outlined their plan to have a FCC staff person assigned to each of the five counties involved in this digital transition. That representative then worked with local government officials, broadcasters, community and business leaders, and the public at large to saturate each county with information on this coming event. Through their resources, they set up informational events at our local festivals, farmer's market, senior centers, churches, civic organizations, low-income apartments and the department of social services. They truly seemed to be everywhere educating our residents and answering their questions.

I also want to thank the various retailers who planned accordingly to have plenty of converter boxes in stock and staff members who were knowledgeable and able to assist the public with answers to their questions. Our local broadcasters also played another key role as they frequently advertised informative commercials reminding their viewers of the Big Switch date happening in Wilmington on September 8. I feel that the collaborative effort of this private - public partnership was a key component to the success of this event.

Another important segment in our community that they met with was our emergency management teams. Being in hurricane alley, it was vital that this group was also informed and their concerns addressed. Many residents depend on the use of battery powered analog TV's as their means of obtaining critical information after a hurricane event. Both residents and emergency management personnel expressed apprehension about turning off the analog signal while in the middle of our hurricane season. The FCC addressed those concerns by telling us that in the event of an approaching hurricane –

FIRST they would not make the switch and SECOND that they would give our local broadcasters the ability to switch over to analog signal.

I must compliment the FCC and Chairman Martin for their foresight as these two things eased the concerns of our emergency management folks as well as our citizens.

The other main concern in our area was making contact with the elderly and those who depend solely on over-the-air TV signals through the use of rabbit ears and roof-top antennas. The overall education and public awareness by our local broadcasters and the FCC was outstanding and yet, for all of the public outreach and education, we still had residents that went dark on September 8 at noon. It was reported to me that predominately the vast majority of the calls first received right after the switch were seniors who either did not want to even try to install the converter box or they attempted to install the box but were not finding success. It also appears that many of these callers were not scanning the channels after they installed their box or, that they would need to perform an additional

scan after the Big Switch at noon in order to receive all the channels.

Many sons, daughters, and neighbors have been calling to request assistance for an elderly community member.

As of September 15, the City of Wilmington had over 300 calls, 80% needed technical assistance with their boxes over the phone, while the other 20% needed more in-depth help of a home visit from the fire department. We have also been very successful using our fire personnel to help those needing technical assistance with their converter boxes and at the same time, having our fire personnel check for working smoke alarms. We found most residents, who might be apprehensive with a stranger, were willing to let firemen into their homes. Another surprise to us was that, in fact, after some time, many of our callers were not the elderly or disabled looking for assistance but were the general public at large.

Key components to our success were:

- Conducting soft tests within our market – one was a 1 minute test and the other was a 5 minute test – which alerted viewers if they were not equipped to view digital programming
- Getting the information out to the public early on
- Having information available to the general public through many resources and at various locations
- Collaborative efforts from all areas of the marketplace – broadcasters, FCC staff, retailers, government officials
- In conjunction with New Hanover County, a “Television and Computer Recycling Day” was held on August 30

Problems Experienced in Wilmington:

- Post Switch - Too many callers for one staff person
- Most callers had properly installed the converter boxes yet were unaware of the need to run autoscan
- Callers were contacting the one designated helpline to request assistance in setting up their “secondary televisions” within their residence; resulting in calls that were not an immediate priority unlike the households who were not receiving any reception at all
- In a small sector of our population, there were still some that could not afford the converter box even with a coupon
- The FCC grant money was designated for specific use and was not available to be used at the discretion of the local municipalities to assist this small group of the population

Suggestions to other markets:

- Inform the public to act early not to wait as coupons take time to receive
- Have a staff of individuals trained in both the technology and the installation of the converter boxes ready to handle the influx of calls
- The general public wanted to speak directly to someone immediately, not a voice mail or busy signal; resulting in frustration
- Encourage local governmental offices to apply for grant funding through the FCC to be used for fuel and other costs associated with resolving problems after the switch to digital signals